LYRA FORGER

HOUSE OF LILITH

THE ORIGINALS OF GRIMM ACADEMY

LYRA FORGER

HOUSE OF LILITH

THE ORIGINALS OF GRIMM ACADEMY

House of Lilith

The Originals of Grimm Academy series

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

First Edition 2023

Cover design: Artscandare

Copyright © 2023 Storycraft OÜ

LYRAFORGER.COM

All rights reserved.

Acknowledgements

Big shoutout to the unsung heroes who made this book happen.

Let's start with my partner in crime, Rose. She's not just a writing partner; she's the secret sauce. From the first draft to the "I'm-so-done-with-this" final version, she's been my literary sidekick. No words can do justice to her awesomeness.

Seriously, I checked the thesaurus.

Now, a massive virtual hug to my friend squad—old pals and the new ones who jumped on this crazy train. You guys had zero doubts when I had a gazillion. Thanks for making my doubts disappear faster than vampire magic.

A big debt of gratitude to my *numer one fan*, Ivana (that's official now), who has read my book more times that I have. For your amazing helpfulness and enthusiasm, there are no words. The universe better repay you, or I will!

Another big thanks to Maria, who gave up her time to help make this book great. And my sincerest gratitude to my beta readers. You tackled the flaws in this book like superhero crimefighters. Mistakes? Hiccups? They don't stand a chance against this amazing group.

And an obligatory shoutout to my ARCmages—y'all are like wizards waving your magic wands of support. I'd offer you a spellbook, but I'm pretty sure that's not how it works.

And here's to the Facebook group that made this all even more surreal—✨ BookTok Baddies ✨, you're not just a group; you're my squad of internet rockstars. Thanks for the love and laughs. Who knew a Facebook group could be so legit?

They say no one accomplishes anything alone. And how true that is.

May each of you get the recognition and rewards you deserve. And maybe a side of fries because, why not? 🍟

Hey gorgeous! Before you dive into the pages of this tantalizing tale, I've got a little heads-up for you. This book is like a hot chili pepper—full of spice and heat. So, if you're not up for some steamy scenes and mature content, you might want to reconsider.

I've been told that this book almost doesn't need a trigger warning, but just in case, here's the lowdown on what you're in for:

- Steamy sex scenes
- Grown-up themes
- A sprinkle of strong language and adult content
- Depictions of emotional abuse
- Moments of nudity and sexual tension
- Hints of BDSM and kink
- Blood and violence (though nothing over the top)

So, if you're ready for an adventure that's hotter than hot, pour yourself a glass of wine, get cozy, and buckle up for a journey into a world filled with passion and excitement.

This book isn't for the faint of heart, but if you like it sizzling, it's the perfect read for you!

Contents

Pronunciations

Prologue

1. Chapter 1 - Nyx

2. Chapter 2 - Dahrian

3. Chapter 3 - Nyx

4. Chapter 4 - Dahrian

5. Chapter 5 - Nyx

6. Chapter 6 - Dahrian

7. Chapter 7 - Nyx

8. Chapter 8 - Dahrian

9. Chapter 9 - Nyx

10. Chapter 10 - Dahrian

11. Chapter 11 - Nyx

12. Chapter 12 - Dahrian

13. Chapter 13 - Nyx

14. Chapter 14 - Dahrian

15. Chapter 15 - Nyx
16. Chapter 16 - Dahrian
17. Chapter 17 - Nyx
18. Chapter 18 - Dahrian
19. Chapter 19 - Nyx
20. Chapter 20 - Dahrian
21. Chapter 21 - Nyx
22. Chapter 22 - Dahrian
23. Chapter 23 - Nyx
24. Chapter 24 - Dahrian
25. Chapter 25 - Nyx
26. Chapter 26 - Dahrian
27. Chapter 27 - Nyx
28. Chapter 28 - Dahrian
29. Chapter 29 - Nyx
30. Chapter 30 - Dahrian
31. Chapter 31 - Nyx
32. Chapter 32 - Dahrian
33. Chapter 33 - Nyx
34. Chapter 34 - Dahrian
35. Chapter 35 - Nyx

Pronunciations

- Dahrian – Just like Darian, but with a bit of a *growl*. You know, all shifter-like.
- Ydril – ee-drill. Although don't show this to any fae – they would be appalled by my oversimplification!
- Vasilisa – vas-e-lissa
- Hilde – hill-deh
- Fiáin – fee-awn
- Archon – aar-chn

Prologue

Once upon a time, the world was divided into two distinct groups: the Scions, ordinary humans who roamed the earth with dreams and ambitions, and the Originals—vampires, shifters, and fae, beings of magic and mystery.

For millennia, the lands were fraught with tension and strife, as humans and Originals clashed in conflicts that echoed through the ages. The Originals were powerful, but few, and the Scions were thrifty and numerous. Shadows stretching across their lands, the Originals went into hiding, and gradually, Scions forgot of their existence. But the Originals had always been here, hidden in plain sight - in forests, in villages, on thrones.

When conflict began brewing anew, the Brothers Grimm, wielders of ancient tales, penned The Treaty—a simple yet binding pact between Scions and Originals. The Treaty's essence: coexistence. Originals, once shadows among humans, emerged from the cloak of secrecy.

The Treaty decreed that both Scions and Originals would coexist, each within their own social order. The Originals, rulers of the supernatural, found their place in the intricate tapestry of society. Humans, in turn, retained their world, governed by their own customs and rules. A crucial stipulation of The Treaty, however, mandated that all Originals must attend

academies, institutions where they would learn the delicate art of balancing power and responsibility.

In the heart of Germany, Grimm Academy rose. Atop an ancient Originals' underground castle, a place pulsing with potent magic, the Brothers Grimm laid the foundations. Above ground, three magnificent towers, one for each Original bloodline, blended seamlessly with the ancient foundations underneath, a testament to a realm where reality and enchantment intertwined. Known by an ancient name, whispered in the wind, it was The Castle That Isn't—a name echoing the mysteries buried underground, within its unknown walls.

Grimm Academy, shrouded in a mystic ambiance, transcends the mundane. Midnight carries with it the hushed rustle of unseen spirits, shadows assume a life of their own, and secrets are woven into the very fabric of existence.

Vampire.
Shifter.
Fae.

Welcome to Grimm Academy.

"As I approach life's end, I must reveal a tale etched in the shadows, weighing on my soul.

I was there when the Umbrage happened. I saw the might of the Obscura, a duskenwood creation for rival academies' Games. A competition where alliances crumbled, and individual brilliance faced reckoning. A spectral force that spared no mercy, yet chose not to deal in finality. Many lives were lost that day. The Obscura, a spectral overseer, bore witness, its magic navigating the chaos. As my ink wanes, I share this mosaic of mysteries—the Obscura, the Games, and the haunting echoes of a bloodbath that time can't fully obscure.

May The Word bless us all."

– ARCmage Linithus, 1867

Chapter I - Nyx

I fling the door to my Grimm Academy dorm room open and stop midstep, my eyes narrowing as soon as they land on my bed. There's the suitcase they've just brought up, but right next to it lies a black gift box with a luxurious gold ribbon. I frown before I feel a sudden, violent rush of excitement. Could it be the uniform?

It's all it takes for me to slam the door closed and run over to the bed, already being swept up in the fantasy in which *I'm* the one who stays until the very end — preferably the only one — making my Academy the winner of the first Games in one hundred and fifty six years.

It's only when I fail to open the box that I notice the seal on the little note sticking out from beneath the ribbon. It's the crowned bear.

Mother.

I frown. She never sends me gifts. Despite all the servants keeping her calendars, she regularly forgets my birthday. So what's this?

Hesitantly, I pull the note out. "It's a big day for my little girl," it says, in her elegant cursive.

As always, the nickname makes me want to fling myself off the nearest cliff. So I focus on the 'big day' part instead.

My eyebrows raise. I know it's something I've been talking about ever since the preparations for the Selection last year, but for her to remember how much I'm looking forward to all this? Especially since I was one of

those who barely made the cut, the weakest of all the vampires, only stronger than a few shifters and faes.

Excitement making me impatient, I let the note fall back on my bed and I focus on the box. Beautifully, richly wrapped as always. As befits a duchess whose sole focus in life is to project the image of the perfect noblewoman of House of Lilith.

When I open the box, in it, I find a lavish dress in the latest vampiric fashion. Lots of black tuile, onyx studs, a tailored waist. It's not made to appear slutty, but it is made to accentuate every curve.

I make a face. Not exactly my kind of thing.

I take the dress out of the box, its hem falling to the carpeted floor in one graceful, flowy movement. I let my eyes drag down its length. I guess it never occurred to her that I'd have to actually walk around in this monstrosity.

Still, it's a gift.

From my mother.

It's only then that I notice another note that's fallen out of the box.

"Max told me it's your third anniversary tonight," it says, making my excitement deflate. "So in the name of Lilith, I beg of you, Anastasya, refrain from your usual questionable fashion choices and just wear the dress I picked for you. You'll thank me later."

"P.S. Make sure your brother and cousin behave tonight."

Even after I read the note, my eyes get drawn back to 'Anastasya'. I feel myself start to fume. A million times. Haven't I told her, *a million times*, to call me Nyx?

But this is *Irina Nikolayevna Romanova* we're talking about.

Fighting not to lose my cool, I take the dress with me to the full-length ebony mirror by the window. I hold it up in front of myself, grimacing at the very thought of wearing it. I drag my eyes down what I was planning on wearing. Ripped black tights, forest-green cashmere sweater and a gray puffer vest. So comfy, I think with longing as I turn my eyes back onto the dress.

But the words echo in my head. "I beg of you."

Grumbling, I take my clothes off, I put the dress on and I turn back to the mirror. It actually renders me kind of speechless, the way it makes me look. I'm still thin, but I no longer seem so angular. And normally, I've no tits to speak of, but this…

My mother would be very happy indeed, I think with bitterness in my internal voice. It's all she ever wanted for me. To look pretty, as pretty as *I* can look, that is. To date a prince who'll someday marry me. To be proud, just like she is, of our heritage, the holy Romanov dynasty that for three long centuries hid from the Scions that we were in fact vampires. And most of all, to focus all my attention on other people's opinions instead of finding my purpose.

Little does she know that I already have one. That, when I become Princess, I intend to be *nothing* like *her*.

Wearing the dress she picked out for me, I let my eyes sweep over the room she insisted on decorating for me. I like that it's all dark wood, but it's so extravagant — the four-post bed, the closet lining an entire wall, the decorative mirrors and lamps everywhere. All wasted on me, someone who'd be happy with a futon and only cares about the desk below the window, that is, its secret drawers.

But that's Mother, forever failing to see we're not the same person. The night they came in the mail, the invitations to enter the Selection, we had a dinner guest who started talking about the connection between succeeding in competitions like the Games and making something of yourself on our political scene. And all I wanted was to pick his brain, while all she wanted was for me to smile and nod.

Still, it was that night that made me become truly determined to win this. I don't know when exactly this will happen, but at some point in the near future, I'll be the one ruling over people alongside my husband. And I'm only twenty two, but it's never too early to start earning their respect.

That makes my lips curl into a smile and turn my focus back onto my reflection. I suspect Mother's expecting me to put my choppy, shoulder-length raven hair into some elaborate hairstyle. So I know what I'll do. I'll just leave it down.

I turn to face the bed and rush to pick my boots up off the floor. As I sit on my bed, lacing them up, I can't help but smile with excitement. Max is probably already in the Entrance Hall, waiting for me. We've been together for three years, but I feel like I've known him my whole life. And he always manages to bring some warmth into my day.

And he'll be escorting me to the Opening Ceremony, I think as I finish lacing my boots up. I spring from the bed and grab my knife from the nightstand. With deft movements, I spin it around my fingers and slide it

into my corset, moving to walk out of my room. Our guests' Archon — the principal of the Academy we share a Heart Bond with, the one we'll be hosting and competing with in the following year — she could already be here.

And right now, it seems as if my entire future is hanging in the balance, but tonight's Grimm Academy Opening Ceremony, it'll be like no other, in the last one hundred and fifty six years at least.

A breath of fresh air in this stale, stale life.

*

"Aren't you breathtaking?" Max says, smiling, as he watches me get out of the Elevator and into the buzzing Entrance Hall, where he's been waiting to take me to the Opening Ceremony.

He holds his forearm out for me, making my lips curl into a smile. He looks dashing, a little spindly but elegant, in his brand-new formal suit with black feathers on his shoulders, his silver hair slicked back in the latest fashion.

"Thank you," I say, sweetly, as I take his arm. I give him a kiss and let him start leading me in the direction of the Dining Hall, where the Ceremony will be taking place. "But I thought you loved my usual outfits," I poke at him.

He throws me a side glance. "You know I think they're the height of fashion itself," he replies with a little smirk.

I laugh and give him a little shove on the shoulder. He's in a good mood tonight, I think as I throw him a sneaky glance. This will be fun.

Then, just as we pass the Brothers Grimm statue, he makes me stop so he can lean in and whisper, "Though, you might soon find yourself wearing dresses like that a bit more often."

It makes my eyebrows pull down.

He lets out a little laugh, his eyes darting to my dress before he gives me a funny little look. "What, you thought this would be the only one I'd have her pick out for you?"

I roll my eyes as soon as it hits me. "And here I thought this was just Mother's doing," I say, pretending to scold him as I keep walking towards the archway into the Dining Hall. This isn't the first time he's done something like this, but I don't want to linger on that. With a smile on my face, I ask, "But what's the occasion?"

Is it the anniversary, I think with a flutter in my stomach.

He just shrugs. “Do you always have to know everything?” he asks nonchalantly, but a little teasingly.

The butterflies in my stomach go crazy. “Of course I do,” I insist, wanting him to explain straight away, but he’s already taking me through the archway and into the Dining Hall.

It makes me forget what we were talking about and I nudge him to stop, my eyes sweeping over the enormous old hall.

I’ve never seen the place this packed and I’ve never heard a murmur this feverish. The long rows of carved-wood tables stretching from the entrance all the way to the podium with the professors’ table, you practically can’t see them from all the students and all the food already laid out before them. And the elaborate chandeliers hanging from intricately vaulted ceilings are casting a soft light onto all the richly woven tapestries, stained-glass window panes, checkered floor tiles… All green and gold, the colors of our Academy.

Tonight, it all seems to glow with a special light. But what excites me most is the flag I see hanging off the wall opposite me, above the professors’ table.

“Impatient?” I hear Max ask.

And I turn to look at him, smiling from ear to ear. “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

He lets out a laugh, wraps his arm around my waist and nudges me to keep moving. I know he likes showing me off, and I can’t say I object too much. As we walk to the front, where they’ve laid out five special little round tables for our own notable families to the left and ten for our guests to the right, I sense Max basking in the kind of sycophant stares and smiles only a Prince could attract. I don’t quite enjoy the attention like he does, the stares, the fakeness of it all. But he says I’ll get used to it. I hope so.

Once we reach the front, we first do a round of greeting the royals sitting at the other four tables, but we don’t linger. Everyone seems to be too excited to engage in small talk.

So we walk over to our table, Max pulling a chair out for me. I give him a warm smile and I take my seat, lifting the hem of my dress off the polished tiles.

It’s just as Max settles in that I spot Nikolay and Hilde approaching. They’re chatting as they’re walking, my brother gesturing as excitedly as usual. He looks carelessly handsome in his dark suit with a white cravat, his

unruly, wavy dark hair and usual stubble balancing the posh out. And Hilde's once again squeezed her plump body into a dress that's a size too small, which I simply don't get. As if she's ashamed of her curves. Still, her rich red hair she's put up into an elaborate hairstyle, giving her whole outfit a more regal look.

Even after they stroll over to our table, my brother and cousin don't sit right away. Hilde throws us both a wide smile.

"Hi Max, hi Nyx," she says sweetly, her eyes lingering on mine for a second.

I tip my head at her, my attention getting drawn to my brother craning his neck, seemingly inspecting the flag above the still empty professor's table.

Where last year and all the ones before there was only the Grimm Academy crest, a shield in an ornate gold frame featuring the sigils of all three bloodlines, now there are two of them. The other one shows the sigil of just the shifter bloodline, a full moon divided in half, one side light and one dark. Together with the couple of stars at its top, it represents our guests' Academy.

"Is that theirs, Max?" Nikolay asks as he turns to my boyfriend.

"No, it's the cleaners'," Max replies with a warm yet condescending smile. "Just last night, they started their own Academy." He turns to throw me a smug glance, but I just look away, rolling my eyes at the two of them. I don't like the way he sometimes talks down to people, but that's the price you pay for picking someone so full of confidence.

For a second, there's silence. Then Nikolay lets out a rough bark-like laugh. "Oh, you crack me up, you old fool." And he finally takes his seat, cousin Hilde immediately following suit.

"Isn't this cool?" she asks. You can feel the need for approval in every sound she ever produces. "All thanks to you, Max."

He throws her a lazy smile.

"Yes yes," my brother cuts in, lit up as he grabs a bottle of champagne from the ice bucket, "the spot is amazing, the best in the whole bloody Hall."

I frown, turning to Max, expecting him to correct her. But he doesn't acknowledge it, that we Romanovs would be at this table even if *he* weren't.

"But what *I* really want to talk about is, like," my brother goes on excitedly, now sliding his forearms down the table so he can get closer as he

searches for the right words. I squint at him. When he finds them, he says them in a hushed voice. “What to expect.”

And he glances around the table as if he’s just come to us with something so intriguing yet impossible to even try answering.

I throw him an incredulous look. “You’re talking as if they’re from another planet,” I snap.

“Well, maybe they are,” he drawls like he does when he’s getting ready to try to rip me a new one. I fold my arms in anticipation. “Remind me,” he asks mockingly, “what was the name of the one you made up back when *no one* wanted to hang out with Your Sulkiness?”

I hear Max let out a chuckle. And I still feel my own nagging impatience to be given a glimpse into a world that’s not ours, but I just stare at my brother for a second. “They’re shifters,” I say flatly. “We have shifters here. What exactly is it that’s confusing you, oh brother darling?”

“I used to hang with the wolves here, Nick,” Hilde cuts in, her use of the word ‘hang’ making me wince a little. “I’m sure their shifters are a lot like them.”

“Really?” I hear Max say mockingly. “You *hung* with the wolves?”

Nikolay lets out another chuckle and Hilde’s pale skin goes beetroot red in an instant, but Max just goes on. “So in your vast and thorough experience, the fact our shifters and their shifters come from very different places means absolutely nothing? And history proves that?”

Still blushing, Hilde stutters, “Well, no—”

Nikolay barks out a laugh, mockingly echoing her with his own, “Well, no—”

I kick him in the shin under the table. “Hey,” he yells out, throwing me a frown.

Innocently, I mouth ‘What?’

“What I *meant* to say,” Hilde cuts in, demanding attention. When I turn to her, she seems to have collected herself. “In *some* ways, our shifters and their shifters are probably the same. We’ll just have to see what the differences are.”

And with that, she gives a content nod.

Now, that’s what I *really* hate about my cousin. How quickly she’ll change the tune at the first sign of someone disagreeing with her.

Max rolls his eyes and leans back in his chair, but despite a brave face, I catch a hurt look in Hilde’s eyes.

It makes a pang of regret shoot through me. She always has a kind word for every single one of us, and all we ever do is give her trouble. I let out a sigh and I look around the table until I spot Jacquard's blood gin among all the bottles. I grab it and I lean across to shove it into my cousin's hands.

"Here, Hilde," I say, fighting not to sound cold as I ease back into my chair. "Didn't you say that's your favorite?"

She throws me an appreciative smile, but it's at that exact moment that the gong sounds and all eyes dart to the front of the Hall.

There, a procession of professors starts coming out of a hidden door to the left of their table. I see Uncle Ludwig among them, but it's only when I spot our Pied Piper walking with a woman I've never seen before that I feel another pang of excitement.

It's clear that all eyes in the room are on *her*. And she can be no other than the Fiain Academy Archon, the famed Cerys Brogan. As the Pied Piper leads her to the center of the professors' table, I watch her strong yet soft gaze sweep over the room, her wavy gray hair falling to a simple yet festive robe.

The Pied Piper stops in front of her own wood-and-bone high chair and motions for the guest to take a seat to her right. Brogan gives her a smile and lowers herself into the chair. It's only when she does, that the Pied Piper turns to the crowd.

Johanna de Groot. I've never once managed to even look at her without this thrill spreading through me. And it's not because she's a ridiculously tall woman in a black robe, with a raven braid, piercing black eyes and a jawline that looks as if it could cut through anything. No. It's her position, a truly high one, coupled with the way she holds herself, as uncompromisingly and authoritatively as any man I've seen. A rare jewel in the vampire community.

"Greetings, everyone," she starts in her bored drawl. "Now, as you all know, I'm all for the briefest of toasts…"

I hear chuckles all around me. The Pied Piper smiles, but she just keeps going. "But tonight… Tonight we have our brothers and sisters to greet, the ones our Academy shares the Heart Bond with. And they've agreed to revive a tradition of old. The joining of our two academic families for an entire year, a year of strengthening our magic through cooperation and a bit of healthy competition."

Someone lets out a wolf whistle and everyone laughs. Even my lips tug into a smile.

"Of course," the Pied Piper continues, making everyone fall silent again, "we all know what history our two Academies share." There's nervous shifting before she says, "But let's not allow what happened a hundred and fifty six years ago to taint the future." She motions at the tables opposite the one we're sitting in, the only ones that are left empty. "This year, we'll be hosting a hundred students from the Fiáin Academy and we need to make them feel as welcome here as if none of that ever happened."

To my surprise, she looks to our table. "I'm counting on you, the royal Aalders and Romanov families, the ones that were here the last time we did this, to help ease the transition."

I see Max puff his chest out and nod.

"Now," the Pied Piper says with a sharp nod and raises her voice so it echoes through the enormous Hall, "let's give the honor to Professor Schwarz of Grimm Academy, our Guardian of the Obscura."

The room breaks out into clapping and cheering as Uncle Ludwig gets out of his seat and comes to stand in front of the professors' table, clad in a gold-stitched green robe with the Guardian's pendant around his neck. There's excited murmuring as he takes the Box out of some hidden pocket.

I zoom in to see better. I've never laid eyes on it before, the weird little contraption that the Brothers Grimm had Dame Gothel make to bring our two Academies closer together. The box that started it all. The Obscura. It actually looks quite plain, just a rectangular wooden item with some carvings on it.

"To think Nyx and I used to spend hours trying to talk Uncle into showing us *that*," I hear my brother say to Hilde.

He lets out a chuckle, but I don't even look at him. I keep my eyes fixed on the box. I'm eager to see, for the first time ever, the first of the three figurines hiding inside — Door, Hourglass and Judge, each serving its own purpose. Door for getting the students of the other Academy to the one where the Games are held. Hourglass for using magic to devise and execute each of the five Games.

And then there's Judge, but that one's a bit more complicated. It's never been used before and no one really knows what it does, the Guardian of the Obscura keeping the purpose secret.

I see both Brogan and our Pied Piper getting up and coming to stand closer to the Box, shaking their hands and making it start glowing. It's something everyone knows, that the Box requires at least one member from both Academies to be activated.

The two principals go back to their seats, Uncle Ludwig takes a step back, opens the Box and puts his hand inside.

Then he pauses, the silence in the room palpable, before he pulls out a small stone door and throws it in the air.

I hold my breath.

The very next second, the figurine turns into an enormous wooden door that comes to hover right above the floor.

There are excited gasps all around me, but I guess we won't be lingering on this as some special moment, because the door almost instantly flings open and I see shapes starting to come through. Human shapes.

I watch a hundred Fiain shifters step out and form a circle. And they're as different from each other as they can be, but they're all dressed a lot more casually than we are and they all have tribal tattoos. There's silence as they join hands, almost instantly making the tattoos start to glow. The air in the circle starts spinning and the very next second, I see countless animals leaping and flying out of it, wolves hitting the ground running, ravens soaring high up above and bears lifting themselves on their hind legs to roar at us all.

There's an excited murmur all around me as I crane my neck to watch one of the wolves keep running up a wall, doing a flip in the air and then charging straight back into the circle, where he gets swallowed by the whirlwind like the rest of the animals.

By the time the shifters let go of each other's hands, turn to us and bow, there's only a scattered applause, even though I can tell everyone is in awe.

But even as they walk to the tables reserved for them, the door doesn't close.

What are we waiting for, I wonder with a flutter in my stomach.

The very next second, I see the tallest guy yet stroll out of the mirror and come to a stop, sliding his hands into his pockets.

And sure, he's unusually hot, but he's dressed very simply — T-shirt, jeans and boots. Even simpler than the rest of them. So it surprises me when the shifters all break out into thunderous clapping and whistling.

Maybe the clue is in the tattoos, I think as my eyes dart to the ones covering his arms.

I sense Max tense up, but even though I'm aware of the risk, I don't look away from the Fiain.

I watch him throw the cheering shifters this lazy grin. It almost makes me blow out a laugh, when he proceeds to counting them, looking all relaxed yet solemn as he does it, seemingly giving zero fucks about hundreds of students and professors waiting for him to be done with it.

Ah, I think to myself, he must be the alpha.

I zoom in on him a little. He's definitely not what I'd expect. He *is* all muscle, like most alphas I've seen, but he's elegant somehow. Elegant and careless at the same time, I think as I spot the light stubble and the way he keeps the straight, light brown hair that's falling to his shoulders swept off his face.

It's just at that moment that he finishes counting, gives a content nod and slides his hand back into his pocket. And he turns to scan the general crowd before him with an easy smile on his face, before he does a little bow and walks away.

It earns the greatest applause, the women in the crowd letting out wolf whistles.

I lean a little to the side to watch him take his seat, interested in seeing what kind of shifter he is. Here, it's mostly wolves, but no. Not him.

"Not in the least impressive," I hear my brother say, making me snap out of it. "You'd all have a lot more fun watching me use Mind Magic on all of them."

"Thank gods it's not allowed," I say with a roll of my eyes. I really hate it when he's showing off like this.

"I wish it were," I hear Max say even as the Pied Piper gets up again to greet the newcomers and talk about the ensuing year of competitions between the two Academies. "Because this really was anticlimactic."

"I thought it was a breath of fresh air," I reply as I look around the table. "Someone giving zero fucks about all the pomp. And, well," I say with a smile, motioning at the room, "at least the *girls* seem to have liked his performance."

As soon as I say it, I realize I shouldn't have. Max's forehead scrunches up as he notices the giggles and the stares, including Hilde's, in the

direction of the alpha. “Maybe they were laughing at his clothes,” he snaps a little.

I let out a laugh, maybe a bit too loud, but he smirks and seems contented. Disaster averted.

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” my brother chimes in as he throws Hilde and I a smile. “You’re all so obsessed with it.”

I roll my eyes, refusing to get into it, but now he’s frowning, turning to look at the shifters again. “But they *are* all dressed like they’ve just crawled out of the forest.”

I throw daggers at him. “Didn’t you apply to become a sort-of buddy for one of them?”

He makes a face at me, but Max doesn’t let him answer. “Doesn’t matter,” he cuts in, a little coldly, making me squint at him. “The only thing that does is the Games. And we’ll wipe the floor with their asses.”

I love this version of him — strong, smart, determined. “As long as we have *you* on our team,” I finally say, giving him a soft smile.

And I don’t even finish the sentence, but I can tell it did the job. He returns the smile and leans in for a kiss, then turns to my brother, the two of them jumping into a heated discussion on how exactly they’re going to kick those asses.

I know Max is strong and capable, but they’re just assuming we’re going to win. Not even questioning it. Me? I can’t help but notice the stark contrast between our two groups. Sure, it’s plain to see by the clothes which Academy is higher status, but there’s a toughness in the shifters’ demeanors that makes my fellow Grimm Academy colleagues seem so soft and sheltered all of a sudden. And that makes me a bit apprehensive about everything.

Including the party that’s supposed to happen right after dinner.

*

I inhale deeply, trying to enjoy the balmy night air, but the tension in it is just too palpable. Resting my head on my closed fist with my elbow propped up on the high table, I twirl the stem of my champagne flute in my fingers. I don’t listen to Max, Nikolay and Hilde’s conversation. My eyes are sweeping over the crowd gathered for our garden party, trying to figure out why it doesn’t feel like one.

The huge cobblestone ring around the Dame Gothel statue, which is at the very center of the castle grounds, has been scoured and the normally empty

space strewn with countless tables like ours. The three towers, Lycan Tower with the forest looming behind, Ydril with the Sobbing Lake shimmering below and Lilith with the Graf Hill perched above, they're barely more than silhouettes against the night sky, but there are strings of lights running from their tops all the way to the statue. And there's music coming from enchanted instruments all around us.

But the usual merry chatter is missing, people are sipping their drinks with bored looks on their faces, and it only takes a single glance to see that Grimm students are steering clear of Fiáin ones and vice versa.

The only one who seems to be having fun is that alpha, indiscriminately going from table to table with a grin on his face.

I throw a glance around my own table. The three of them don't seem to either notice or care that the party's not going too well. Hilde is scrolling on her phone while Max and Nikolay are arguing, albeit in low voices, about something having to do with the vampire King.

This was supposed to be fun, and Max hasn't even tried to involve me in the conversation. I can already see all my excitement slowly fizzling out.

I know I should know better, but I decide to interrupt the conversation. I grab Max's hand. He looks at me with a puzzled face. I lean in, like it's a conspiracy.

"Why do they all seem to have an identical fox tattoo?" I ask, as I motion at the upper arm of one of the Fiáin girls walking by.

They all turn to look in the girl's direction.

Nikolay lets out a wolf whistle and says, "I know why it is."

I frown, but I do find myself intrigued.

He turns to me with a huge grin on his face. "It's because all their women are so foxy."

Hilde chuckles. I myself let out an exasperated sigh and turn to Max. "We've just seen some of them shift," I say, "and they're definitely *not* all foxes." I want to draw out Max's playful side, the one I love arguing with. But he stays silent.

"Does it really matter?" Nikolay drawls.

"What do you even mean?" I ask as I turn back to him. "Isn't part of the point of all this for us to get to know each other?"

"I agree with Nikolay," Max cuts in, all serious. "It's completely irrelevant. They lost the last time we did this and that's exactly what's going to happen *this* time."

Finally, I have his attention. I shake my head. “But they *didn’t* lose, did they?” I say, giving him an excited smile. “The Games never got to be finished that year. But up to the point when the Umbrage happened, they were *winning,* by a landslide, making everyone at our Academy butthurt.”

I look at him with smiling eyes, but he just rolls his. He knows how it annoys me when he does that. But I decide to let it go. I still want my fun night out. So I smile and wait for him to start talking.

“You’ve got your facts wrong,” he says. “They *knew* they were going to lose so they rigged the Games. It’s just that they weren’t as smart as they thought they were and we caught them red-handed. They were as pathetic and dishonorable as an Academy can possibly be.”

Pathetic? He can be so infuriating sometimes. I know where this is going, but I can’t seem to keep quiet. “And our Academy’s response *wasn’t* dishonorable?” I throw back.

“That’s just something they made up.”

“So what you’re saying,” I drawl, “is that they nearly destroyed their own Academy just to make it seem like we’re the bad guys.”

“Exactly.”

Now, that makes me let out a scoff. “So on one side, we have your conspiracy theories and on the other, my highly reputable sources, but it’s *me* who’s got her facts wrong?”

He rolls his eyes. But I don’t get a chance to react.

“Come on, Nyx,” I hear my brother protest and I turn to look at him. “Can’t you leave fighting for some other time? We were having fun here.”

“There’s a difference between a fight and a discussion, Nikolay,” I say flatly, but I immediately look away, all of a sudden feeling like I really am ruining their fun. I’m the one that’s all worked up. Max just shrugs his shoulders and smiles.

As for Nikolay, I know he’ll just keep talking to Max as if nothing happened.

He does.

They jump back into their conversation, speaking in hushed voices so as to make it clear they won’t be sharing anything with the two of us. For a second, I lock eyes with Hilde and it seems as if she’s going to say something, but she changes her mind and we just end up exchanging an awkward look.

That's what life is like — you can't always have your fun. I turn away from them all and go back to observing the party.

And there's that alpha chatting up a table with Countess Koenig's many daughters. But now, there's also a group of people from both Academies standing below the Dame Gothel statue, most of them nodding away as they listen to one of ours explaining something, gesturing at the towers around us.

For a second, I smile. Then I see how uptight and condescending the guy is being, which makes me realize our guests are only nodding away in an attempt to be polite.

But maybe, just maybe, if I take matters into my own hands, we could actually respect the Pied Piper's wishes and make this a lot more fun for everyone.

"Why don't we play a game?" I say as I turn back to my little party, interrupting Max and Nikolay just as they're done shaking on something.

"Oh," Hilde jumps in, her eyes sparkling, "we could play Thieves and Bloodhounds."

"No," I say, shaking my head vigorously. "I meant something *all* of us here at the party could enjoy. Shadowscape, for example. Everyone knows Shadowscape."

Max raises his eyebrows at me. "Aren't you having fun, cupcake?" he asks with a smile.

I ignore the question so as not to have to lie. There are more important things at stake here. "I don't think anyone else is."

Nikolay shrugs. "I don't see what that's got to do with *us*."

I frown, taken aback by his attitude. But I choose to ignore him. I turn to Max instead, meaning to remind him he's been asked to keep the peace, but I don't get the chance.

He's already coming to wrap his arms around my waist, saying to Nikolay, "I think I know what's going on."

It makes me smile with relief.

But then he continues, glancing from my brother to me and Hilde, "The girls are in need of a little attention."

And my eyebrows are pulling down as he leans to give me a kiss, but it's at the very next moment that there's a clinking of metal against glass coming from the Dame Gothel statue.

Max lets go of me, my head snaps to my right and I hear everyone go silent, but my eyes are already fixed on the alpha standing on top of the three stairs leading up to the statue. He has his glass in his hand and a huge grin on his face. “If I could have everyone’s attention, please.”

I turn a little to the side, interested to see what this is going to be.

“Now,” he says with a smile, his deep yet resonant voice commanding the entire garden, “I know you’re worried I’ll be boring you with a long-winded speech of some kind, but believe me, of all of you, I’m the one most easily bored.”

I smile, hearing laughter coming from all around me.

“I’ll just say how thrilled we are to get the opportunity to spend an entire year with you all. Now, in my case, that’s mostly because I’m *counting* on you to teach my brothers and sisters some basic manners.”

Another burst of laughter as a few of his own give him a playful shove on the shoulder.

“But until then,” he starts, making everyone go silent again.

He motions at one of his pack and the guy holds a ball out for him. “This,” he tells the crowd in front of him as he lifts it above his head, “is the first Shifter Ball Gallagher ever caught. Signed and everything.”

I myself have never been interested in the sport, but the murmur from the crowd tells me this is a big deal.

“And it’s our gift to you,” the alpha says with another grin.

And the next thing I know, he’s flinging the ball into the air and all hell is breaking loose, a bunch of students rushing to catch it while the others start mingling feverishly, most of them getting drawn to the alpha and his circle.

I zoom in on him again, finding him grinning at a Grimm saying something to him, the smile lighting up his gray eyes and revealing a set of perfect teeth. And I can’t help but notice the full lips and the strong jawline balanced out by the elegant, Roman features of his face.

“I think you can relax now, Nyx,” Hilde says and I turn to look at her. She’s giggling as she keeps throwing glances at the alpha. “He seems to have fixed it.”

I hear Max let out a scoff. “As if we couldn’t have done the same.” And my eyes snap to him and I see that his face is tense with hurt pride.

I know better than to ask “Why didn’t you then?”

But for a second, my eyes stay fixed on the alpha. And they narrow in irritation.

I scoff and I turn back to my table, grabbing Max's hand and leaning in for a deep kiss. It's my anniversary, and I won't let anything ruin our night.

*

Now they want to play a game. Now that it wasn't me who suggested it. But I have a really good buzz going on and I've always loved Shadowscape. Max had sent for my favorite drink, and it reignited the butterflies in my stomach. Sometimes he can be so attentive, I can't help but feel special. Seen.

Max and Nikolay still being hush about something, they get up and start leading me and Hilde to the playing tables they'd set up to the right of the Dame Gothel statue.

"So," Hilde starts, her face flushed and her words slurred, as I watch drunk, giddy students take their seats, "I hear it's yours and Max's third anniversary today."

My eyebrows pulling down, I throw her a side glance. Being of the Schwarz line of the family, Hilde has spent most of her life across the country, rarely visiting and only last year arriving to study with us at Grimm Academy. She wasn't here when Max and I first started dating.

"It is," I tell her.

She looks positively giddy as she asks, throwing me a knowing little look, "Anything special planned to celebrate?"

I ignore the look. "I don't really like celebrating those kinds of things," I say, although it's not the complete truth. But it will do for Hilde.

She stays silent for a second. "Of course," she says, as if she's just realized something. And she lets out this annoying little chuckle. "You've probably already done it, haven't you?"

It's only then that I realize she's talking about *the kiss*. And it instantly makes blood rush to my cheeks. Doesn't she realize that's more intimate than talking about sex? But I guess she's too drunk to care.

"I'd tell you all about it, but look, Hilde," I tell her, trying to distract her by motioning at a vampire girl and a shifter guy sitting at the table closest to us, preparing their board, "our first players."

"Sure sure. Will you be my partner?" she asks with giddiness in her voice.

"Why not," I say. I seem to remember she's not very good, but I'd pick her playing Shadowscape over her sniffing around my sex life any day of the year.

I choose our table wisely. As Nikolay and Max keep walking to the one at the center, I lead Hilde straight to the one to the far left. If I lose, I'll just retreat into the audience, but if I win, I won't have to switch seats to play with the winner closest to me.

I'm excited so I don't waste time. I throw myself into one of the chairs, finishing putting all the pieces back in their places before Hilde's even managed to settle in. I hear someone say that they'll be bringing out the *magic* board for the finalists to play on.

Now *that* makes my excitement turn into a cutting resolve to win. It was when Nikolay came home for his first winter break that I first heard about the Grimm Academy Shadowscape board, and I've wanted to play on it ever since. I just thought I'd never get the chance. Magic items are rare and even more rarely used, simply because it takes a powerful magic wielder to burn the spell into an inanimate object and keep it active. And it never stays active forever.

I let my eyes sweep over the crowd, my opponents, that is. I see that Max and Nikolay have already started and that their table even has a couple of spectators.

My own partner is excruciatingly slow and a couple of moves into the game, I start doubting she even understands the game. But it doesn't matter. I'm still having fun, enjoying the way everyone around me is totally immersed, cursing their opponents whenever they manage to take one of their strongholds and shouting in excitement whenever their strategy works and they get their hands on a particularly good piece of land, all represented by neat squares on the board.

So as not to make her feel bad, I take my sweet, sweet time beating my cousin. But once I do, I still have to spell it out to her that she lost. She chuckles, drunker than I've ever seen her and goes to find the bathroom.

I throw a glance at Max and Nikolay and see that there's a whole crowd around their table. Nikolay seems to be winning.

I myself move on to a fae-blooded guy who looks so sure of himself, it gives me much greater pleasure to wipe the floor with his ass.

Then a shifter from our Academy and then one from theirs.

It's only when I'm done with him that Max and Nikolay finish their own game. Max strolls over, gloating under the watchful eyes of the audience he's built.

“Would you do me the honor?” he asks as he takes a seat at my table. He’s in a good mood, thank gods. This will be fun. His admirers just arrange themselves in a neat circle around us. “I’ve just beat your brother and I’m ready to take on another Romanov.”

“Not all Romanovs are made the same,” I tell him with a smirk.

He throws his head back, laughing. It’s my favorite version of him, a little tipsy and playfully competitive. It gets me excited, the prospect of showing him what I’ve got.

One of his admirers appears to his right and pulls a box from behind his back. The board, I think as tingles of excitement rush down my spine. I hear everyone draw in excited breaths. I myself I’m like a hawk as I watch the guy grab the lame board and switch it out for the magic one.

As soon as it’s lowered onto the table, the box produces a soft clicking sound and its four sides drop away. Now it’s a chequerboard with figurines rising out of its surface, the Tower, the Ship, the King.

I feel a tingle as I watch Max make his first move, tapping his finger on it to pick his starting stronghold, the chosen Tower floating up, spinning in the air for a second and then slamming itself back into the ground with a crumbling sound, its top growing a flag.

Ah, I think to myself as I survey the board. The Belyaev’s opening.

I look up to throw my boyfriend a smile as I make my own move. He and I don’t play as much as we used to, but I know he’s still got it. And that only makes the whole thing more fun.

Especially when I see what a good mood he’s in. He keeps trying to distract me and every time he succeeds, he yells out, “Come on, Romanov, be serious, for fuck’s sake.”

It doesn’t fail to make me laugh once.

Still, I don’t let it truly distract me. I only manage to occupy *some* of the territory on the board — the tundra of my family’s native land and the sweeping desert of the South Shifter Kingdoms.

But *then*, then I take my Queen and I slam it right next to his last stronghold. There’s a reaction from the audience, but I don’t care. I look up to my boyfriend, smirking, and I can tell by the look in his eyes that he sees what I did.

He lets out a laugh, a bit tenser than before, he thinks for one long moment and then he slides his King over to my capital.

There's a murmur all around me. My eyebrows shoot up. Then they pull down and stay down as my eyes fix on the board. Wrong move. Even though it looks like he's in a winning position, I know better. He's opened himself up to the Karachev's swoop. A few moves, and it's game over for him. No escape.

Smiling and clicking my tongue, I lift my hand to grab my Queen and start the attack on his Tower. He'll have to move it straight away, since it'll take him more moves to get out of *his* predicament than it'll take me to get out of *mine*.

Smiling, I look up from the board. My hand never reaches my Queen. He catches my eye and there's no smile in his eyes anymore. He stares at me intently, smiling but almost imperceptibly gritting his teeth.

It leaves me confused for a second. Is he mad?

I hear Nikolay join our audience and that makes me aware of all the people around us. Max still piercing holes in my eyes, I pause for another second and look down at the board. *You just love humiliating me*, he'll say. And he does have a reputation to uphold. I know it by now. I grab my Knight instead of my Queen. And I move it to try and fail to defend my capital instead of try and succeed attacking his stronghold.

"Bad move, Romanov," Max says, his mouth cracking into a smile as if nothing happened. The warmth is back in his eyes. I smile a reluctant smile. Disaster averted. And with much self-satisfied ceremony, he lifts his King off the board and slides it next to my capital.

The King takes out his sword and cuts my city in half.

There's a moment of silence after the tiny rocks come crumbling to the board.

Then the crowd cheers.

"Not all Romanovs are made the same, you say?" Max asks with a smile.

"I guess I was wrong," I force myself to say.

The crowd laughs, including my brother.

"Don't worry, I love you all the same, cupcake," Max says and holds out his hand to me.

I throw a forced smile at him and let him take me into a hug, but the smile slides off my face as soon as I see who's standing behind my brother.

That fucking alpha, squinting at me with his head tilted to the side, as if he could tell exactly what happened.

Blood rushing to my cheeks, I look away, but my embarrassment doesn't subside even after I catch him leave with the corner of my eye. No, it's just my imagination. *No one* could tell.

I get up and come to nestle myself in Max's embrace, letting all my embarrassment melt away. I step away and look into his warm eyes, and all I want to do is ask him to take me to my room, but before I can say anything, the clock strikes midnight and the expression on my boyfriend's face changes.

He throws me a warm, mysterious smile as he steps a few feet away and glances over my shoulder.

I frown as I hear movement all around us. And footsteps, a lot of them, as if an entire procession is approaching our table.

What the…

When I look over my shoulder, I see that there *is* one. Exactly thirty six people in formal wear, all holding gorgeous black rose bouquets in their hands and heading straight towards me.

I get up off my seat, a thrill rushing down my spine. Is he actually going to do it? Now? As the crowd around us breaks out into an excited murmur, I look at Max, who's still wearing that mysterious smile on his lips, and then back at the people. They form a half-circle around me.

"One for every month you've made my life brighter, cupcake." I feel him hug me from behind and hear him whisper in my ear as my heart starts pounding in my ears.

He twirls me around, the butterflies in my stomach going crazy. I watch him pull away and get down on one knee. Fireworks explode inside me, leaving me tingling but tongue-tied.

He's actually going to do it. Tonight will be the night we become engaged.

"Will you do me the honor," he starts as he takes a little ring box out of his waistcoat pocket, "of becoming the next Princess of Aalstein?"

And he opens the box, revealing an elaborate aged-silver ring with a giant ruby at the center. I hear excited squeals all around me and I almost fail to stop myself from letting one out as well.

"Yes," I say, my voice a little shaky with emotion as I start nodding vigorously, "yes, I will."

Someone lets out a wolf whistle and Max jumps to his feet, his smile beaming as he looks around the cheering crowd and then puts the heavy

ring on my finger. “I knew you’d say yes,” he tells me when he turns to give me a kiss.

I kiss him back, passionately, my heart starting to pound all over again.

It doesn’t stop even when Max pulls away, and I watch him turn to my brother and shake hands with him, both glowing with satisfaction.

And I want to join them, but I’m already getting swallowed by the host of people with Hilde at the front, all eager to get a better look at my ring and get on good terms with the next Princess.

And I’m smiling, still in shock and shaken up with the thrill of the start of an entirely new era in my life. But thrown into the mix, there’s something that makes me feel strangely suspended in the moment. Something I can’t quite put my finger on.

Chapter 2 - Dahrian

Whistling, I turn the elaborate tap off and make my way out of the overly lavish bathroom on Ground Floor. It's good, I tell myself as I start strolling down the hallway through which I came and back to the party. And it'll be even better once they *actually* get to know us.

Who would've thought, boy, my fox's deep, ethereal voice booms inside my head, *that you'd let yourself be* this *delusional.*

As always, he sounds playful and a little sinister at the very same time. I let out a laugh. "I don't know what you're talking about. I did manage to get the party going, and not thanks to *your* bitching and moaning."

Can't you see how pompous those tiny little pricks are?

I shrug my shoulders. "You think *everyone's* pompous. Keep the peace and stay until the end, that's what Brogan told me. And that's exactly what I'm going to do."

Suit yourself, he drawls, his tone filled to the brim with disgust and exasperation. *But don't come crying to me when it ultimately fails, your desperate little attempt to earn everyone's respect.*

I roll my eyes at him, but that's all I give him before I feel him retreat back into his corners of my mind. Excited to finally get my buzz on, I keep whistling as I walk down the hallway, the Entrance Hall slowly growing larger at its end.

Until my fox lets out a low growl, I feel a tug behind my navel and the world spins around me. I have to fight to stay on my feet, but as quickly as it starts spinning, the hallway comes to a halt and everything settles down, as if nothing ever happened.

I squint, my muscles tense and ready to move. Instead of the Entrance Hall, I have the door to the bathroom in front of me once again.

What the…

I turn on my heel and see that that's where I'm supposed to go. Not without hesitation, I start walking.

Everything seems normal, the soft red carpet not making a sound under my boots, the paintings on the walls looking at me with unmoving eyes.

It's only when I almost reach the end of the hallway that it happens again. The hallway spins and I'm back to looking at the bathroom door.

For a second, I just stand there, calculating as my fox sniffs hungrily.

Whatever type of magic this is, he concludes, *it's nothing menacing.*

I let out a soft laugh, shake my head a little and click my tongue. With a renewed spring in my step, I start walking again.

And just as I almost reach the end of the hallway, it starts spinning again.

But I'm ready.

I break into a sprint, kick myself off the ground, do a flip in the air and roll straight into the Entrance Hall, landing on one knee and my palms pressed firmly to the floor.

Well, my fox drawls, *at least* that *was mildly interesting*. And with that, he slinks back into the shadows.

It's with a huge grin on my face that I spring up and dart into the Elevator to get out of the castle and back into the courtyard.

I let my eyes sweep over my surroundings, checking on the state of the party. Right now, the famed three towers are only mysterious silhouettes against the cloudless night sky, all the light and action concentrating in the cobblestone circle around the Dame Gothel statue. And there's still that light music playing in the background, but there's no more tense silence permeating the air. People seem to be mingling around the many festive high tables, tossing shots back as they exchange stories. I pick up the pace, scanning the crowd for Ricky, eager to tell him all about my Grimm Academy adventures.

I have to elbow my way through the crowd as I look for him.

At one point, this vampire guy barges out of one tightly knit group, a wide smile on his face. He almost knocks into me and I recognize the man Ricky told me is the prince in these parts.

"I just got engaged," he tells me as soon as our eyes lock, still smiling.

"Really?" I ask, my mouth cracking into a grin. "Congrats, mate," I say, giving him a clap on the shoulder.

"Thanks," he says and keeps moving.

It's at that moment that I finally spot my friend.

He's already rushing to me.

"Where were you?" he asks as soon as he stops in front of me, all flustered with worry. "I was just about to send the O'Malley brothers to go sniff you out."

I laugh, patting him on the back.

But I've no time to tell him exactly how useless the brothers would be considering how many whiskeys they've had.

Ricky's eyes dart to a spot behind my back and I look over my shoulder to find a stunning vampire girl giving me doe eyes. Another one, I think as I turn to her, my lips curling into a soft smile.

"Hi," she says with an awkward wave, obviously fighting not to look away.

"Well hello," I say in my gentlest, most encouraging voice as I take a step closer, sliding my hands into my pockets. I can sense Ricky's roll-eye without even having to look at him. "The name's Dahrian. What's yours, gorgeous?"

"Marie," she blurts out and I see the skin on her chest flush a little. Then she presses her arms to her sides and bites the bullet. "There's going to be a bonfire later in the Lycan Forest. I thought you might want to go."

Adorable. "With *you*?" I ask, playfully tilting my head as I drag my eyes down her body. "Try and stop me."

Now, that makes blood rush to her cheeks.

"Perfect," she stutters as she gestures to a group of vampires chatting by the Dame Gothel statue. "My friends are right over there." She turns her eyes back on me. "And I'd really love to introduce you. Dahrian." It's more of a shy whisper, my name on her lips.

Fuck. I click my tongue, taking her by the upper arm and leading her a few steps away from Ricky.

“I’d hate to disappoint you, Marie…” I look deep into her eyes, watching her eyebrows pull down. “So I’m just gonna be upfront. I like to keep things casual, if you know what I mean.”

The disappointment in her eyes is my answer.

I lean to whisper in her ear, “But if you ever find yourself in need of someone who will worship the fuck out of you, albeit for one night only, you know where to find me.”

When I pull away, she’s staring at me intently, biting her lower lip. Her cheeks flush, she throws me a shy smile, gives a quick nod and rushes back into the crowd.

The crowd… My fox’s fur pricks up, keeping my eyes fixed on it. For a second, I think I feel tension emanating from one of my own, just out of eyesight.

“What is it, Boss?” I hear Ricky ask and I snap out of it, turning to face him.

He hands me a glass filled to the brim. Feeling my fox settle down again, I take it, thirstily downing the beer.

“Nothing,” I say with a shake of my head, seeing him relax.

“Still keeping it casual?” he asks, motioning to where the girl disappeared.

I quirk an eyebrow at him. But it’s in a teasing voice that I ask, “Still sniffing around things that are none of your business?”

He shrugs, but he’s being a little suspicious. “I just thought the change of scenery might result in a change in some of your attitudes.”

And I immediately catch onto what he’s doing, but I choose to ignore it. I let my eyes sweep over the people around me, lingering on the women. “They are *something*, these Grimm girls,” I say with a grin and then turn back to Ricky. “But I don’t see them changing anything. I only see them having a lot more fun this year than they did last.”

And I give him a wink.

He looks as if he’s fighting not to roll his eyes at me. “You’re a senior, Boss. That’s around the time they expect you to start expecting you to put down roots.”

I let out a sigh, the smile sliding off my face. “Look, Ricky,” I tell him, deciding we won’t be getting into it again, not tonight. “Being an alpha isn’t about checking boxes. It’s about respect and leadership.” I pause for effect. “If I’m not the type of guy to get attached that way, I’m *not* and that’s the

end of the story. They need the best version of me, not some idea you can't find in real life."

And it looks as if I've hurt his feeling a bit, so I throw the smile back on and I say, "But listen to this, Ricky."

He quirks his eyebrow at me.

"I left to go to the bathroom, yeah?" I tell him with a mysterious smile. "But it took me ages to even get inside the castle."

"Really?"

"It wouldn't let me in," I keep going, growing excited. "I stood there, trying to summon the fucking Elevator for like half an hour, I swear to Lycan himself, but it kept hiding from me." I let out a laugh, amused at the very thought of what other tricks it has up its sleeve, this underground castle.

Ricky's mouth cracks into an excited grin. "Next time, if you're sure you're in the right spot," he tells me, "prick your finger or do something else to draw blood."

I frown. "Why the hell would I do *that*?"

My friend clears his throat the way he does when he's about to go all nerdy on me. He turns to gesture at the spot where the Elevator is hiding, right at the edge of the round cobblestone square we're standing in.

I let my eyes follow, listening to his soft-spoken, scrawny little self say, "The Academy was founded in 1847, the same year the first Games were held, yeah?"

I nod. "But the castle, the underground part at least, was built centuries earlier," I add.

"Exactly. And back then, it was a secret shelter for Originals who had nowhere else to turn. And it was made to only reveal itself to those in need."

I keep staring at the spot for a second, mulling it over. Then I turn to my friend and say, amazed, "Where do you get all this stuff, Ricky? I read like a bunch of books to prepare, but none of them mentioned anything like *that*."

"There are things that Grimm Academy would prefer to stay unknown." He throws me a sly smile. "But I have my ways."

"Look at you," I say as I give him another pat on the shoulder. "Who would've thought you'd be so cunning?"

"Know your enemy," he recites with a proud grin.

“Enemy being the Academy you’re obsessed with? How convenient,” I drawl teasingly, though the concern is starting to seep back into my mind.

And the next thing I know, my fox is letting out a low growl. My head snaps to that same spot I lingered on a moment ago, though the crowd is still making it impossible to see what’s going on. *If* there’s something going on. My ears prick up and my muscles clench, but the more I stare, the less I think there is.

This is getting tiresome, my wolf’s voice booms again. *Let’s pack all the pups up and leave*.

“We *can’t*,” I reply through gritted teeth. “It would be rude to leave this early.” But it *is* getting tiresome and I’m wondering if it’ll really be easy, doing what Brogan asked me to do.

“Ricky?” I ask even before I turn to him.

“Yes, oh esteemed alpha?” he mocks me.

I throw him a grin, using my most casual voice. “What do you think of Brogan?”

Ricky’s eyebrows shoot up. “Um,” he starts, obviously not having expected the question, “she’s a good Archon, I guess. Strong, takes really good care of us.”

“A woman of her word?” I cut in.

He thinks for a second. Then he vigorously nods. “Yes. Yes, I believe she is. But why do you ask?”

I want to know, provided I did everything she told me to, if she’d really give me the professorship. But I can’t tell Ricky *that*. So I just say, “She promised she’d kick all our butts if we didn’t make it till the end,” I say jokingly.

My friend laughs. “I guess we’d deserve it.”

I let out a laugh, too, but it’s not cheerful. My eyes sweep over dozens of my one hundred little proteges. And just like that, I’m back to feeling the full weight of the pressure. Staying on good terms with our stuck-up hosts, keeping all my people alive, being strong and clever enough to make it to the end…

And I know exactly what I’m working towards, but there’s virtually no room for error here. It feels as if my shoulders are caving in.

But just as I decide to stop bitching and just push through it, my fox senses something again.

“Hold on a minute, Ricky,” I say as I decide enough’s enough.

And I feel him move to follow me, but I just dive into the crowd, pushing my chest out and pulling my eyebrows down. The closer I get, the stronger the feeling gets. Yeah, there's definitely something going on.

The crowd starts parting, sensing an alpha's displeasure. It's then that I see it. A couple of my own standing in a half-circle with their backs turned to me.

"Let him go," one of the O'Malley brothers yells out.

And just as he yells that, they sense me. Most of them at least. They turn to face me and in doing that, they reveal what's going on within the circle.

I frown, my fox starting to growl. I see the other O'Malley brother and one of the Grimm students, a fae-blooded one by the looks of him, staring each other down, hands balled into fists vibrating with rage at their sides.

Kill the son of a bitch, my fox demands.

I feel my pack members nervously shift on their feet. I throw a wink in their general direction and I enter the circle, shifting my focus back onto O'Malley and his playdate.

I put my hands in my pockets. "What's the story here?" I ask in a voice that doesn't betray my anger. It comes off amused.

"No need for you to get involved, Boss," O'Malley says, but he doesn't take his eyes away from his opponent.

"No need for *anyone* to get involved," the Grimm student spits out. "I'll be taking *this one* down myself."

"Rip his fucking throat out," I hear my fox's snarl.

For fuck's sake, I think to myself as I let him know this won't be one of *those* situations. Just as things were starting to go well. But at least my fox decides he's bored and retreats.

"What's your name, mate?" I ask as I shift my focus back onto the Grimm student.

"It's none of your business."

I sense Ricky get closer and I hear him whisper in my ear, "Jhaeros."

I glance at the Runes hanging around Jhaeros' neck and I say, "Why don't you come here and we'll get a drink, you and I."

To that, Jhaeros spins around to face me. "Sure," he drawls, "as soon as I get revenge for my great-great-grandfather being called a wuss."

"I just said," O'Malley rushes to explain, exhausted desperation in his voice, "that I believe *my* great-great-grandfather and *his* fought in the Games of 1860."

“Defeated,” Jhaeros yells out, “you said he *defeated* him. But who won in the Umbrage, huh?”

I successfully fight the need to roll my eyes. Instead, I let out a laugh and I come to stand between them, looking down on both their sorry asses.

“So Jhaeros,” I start as I pat him on the back, “now we can have a drink in celebration of *both* your ancestors.”

For a second, he just looks at me, disgust twisting his features. “Over my dead fucking body,” he snarls, propelling spit at my face.

I ignore the way my pack draw in sharp breaths.

Not letting the little fucker look away, I let the smile slide right off my face. I see the expression in his eyes change. “Then you’ll be grabbing a drink by yourself, *mate*.” And it’s polite and calm, what I say, but my voice is low and my tone — final. “Far away from us.”

I watch Jhaerous squirm, almost imperceptibly, bitterly swallowing his every urge to fight back.

I feel everyone’s eyes on us as he lets out a scoff, turns on his heel and walks away. Rushes away, to be more exact.

My pack all start laughing and my lips curl into a smile as I watch them pick up where they left off, the care-free little bastards.

“You did it again,” I hear Ricky say, a touch of pride in his voice.

“No, I didn’t,” I spit out as I turn to him. “It got too close to a fight breaking out.”

But I do feel different than before the incident. I’ve been fretting over nothing, thinking about whether I can do all this. I’m strong, I’m the strongest one at our Academy. And not even they know all that I can do.

A smile creeping back on my face, I take a good look around. Everything seems to be going smoothly once again. I pat Ricky on the shoulder and I say, “I think I’ve had enough for today. I’ll see you at the camp, I was told they got everything ready for us.”

He gives me a smile, though he’s obviously disappointed.

And I turn on my heel and I start making my way to the Sobbing Lake, where the said camp is supposed to be located.

The night is balmy and my blood is running hot in my veins, making the stroll more than pleasant. I glance around, admiring the size of the Academy grounds, especially compared to how diminished ours became over the years. And soon, I spot the shimmer coming from the lake and I see

the wooden piers behind which our own tents have been erected, strings of soft lights hanging in the air between them.

Maybe, just maybe, this will be much more pleasant than I thought, I think just as I start passing a fragrant orchard.

But almost instantly, my ears prick up and I hear something cut through the air, sharp and metallic. My head snaps to my right and I stop, scanning the moonlit gravel path winding through the trees. There's someone there, a girl.

Squinting, I watch her make her way down the path, seeming immersed in her own thoughts. But what was that sound?

As soon as I think that, I watch her lift a hand with a knife and propel it into the night air. The knife returns almost instantly, like a boomerang, and she catches it with such skill and grace, I can't help but want her to do it all over again. And she does, again and again, with such precision and determination that she doesn't stop her stroll for a second, despite the elaborate dress swaying left right.

Slowly, I realize it's the Shadowscape girl, the one I saw intentionally lose the game to that pompous vampire prince just before I went to the bathroom. Or at least I think she did it intentionally. Curious, I stroll over to the path she's walking down.

As soon as I step on it, something nudges me to look down. And like some kind of crumbtrail, I see apple after apple lying on the ground, halves of apples to be more exact. Cut so cleanly in half, it makes my eyebrows shoot up.

I stop and I take another glance at the girl, concern growing inside me once again. They act larger than life, these Grimm Academy students. But it would be a grave mistake to underestimate them.

Chapter 3 - Nyx

Engaged. It's actually happened. And so much sooner than I thought. Lost in my thoughts, I slowly start walking out of the orchard and back to the party. It came as a pleasant surprise, that no one objected to me taking a walk to process what's happened. But now it's time to go back to my fiance.

Still on the path winding through rows of fragrant apple trees, I pause to give a listen in the direction of the courtyard. The party seems to be winding down, low chatter, crickets and night breeze in the leaves the only sounds I can make out. I squint, scanning the rest of the people for Nikolay, Max and Hilde.

Not there. They must be at the after party in the Common Room.

I get out of the orchard and back on the path leading to Lilith Tower. I stop spinning my knife around my fingers to take a look at the ring Max gave me less than an hour ago.

So unreal, I think to myself as I come to a stop below my House's tower. I crane my neck to look up its dizzying heights. It's usually a calming sight, its smooth stone surface always glistening under moonlight. But now, all it makes me feel is that same excitement I felt the first night I spent in it. When Max, only having seen me three times before, filled my room with bouquets of my favorites — black roses.

But what really swept me off my feet, I remember as I enter the tower, is the way he stayed up all night with me, making me talk about things I

hadn’t talked to anyone before. Making me feel safe, seen, desired. He was nothing like the others, all those men who'd only ever shown interest in me for either my title or my land. It’s the night I fell for him and the night he told me he wanted me to be his.

Engaged, I repeat to myself as I climb the winding staircase up to the Common Room. I’m engaged now. But of course, it won’t all be peaches and cream.

Two images pop into my mind. One is the image of Max and I in our future study, working on some issue of actual importance.

The other is of the two of us entering some lavish gala hall, me on his arm in one of those ridiculous dresses they bought me. And it’s everything my mother’s ever prepared me for, to know exactly when to speak, what to say and how much to laugh.

But I know it, simply because I’ve been paying close attention to the other eleven Princesses, I know exactly what kind of questions the journalists waiting for us there will have for me.

“Who are you wearing tonight?” the question echoes in my mind as I keep climbing the stairs.

That’s basically all they ever ask a princess. And if I chose to be truthful and say I neither know nor care, I’d be met with the look, either disapproving or distrustful, but a *look* nevertheless.

And I’m not naive. I’ve known it for a very long time, that sometimes, trying to make too many sudden changes results in a failure to change anything at all. So I’ll just have to memorize stuff like that and pretend I actually care.

But it still upsets me, knowing how easy it is to let people pressure you into changing your beliefs, your focus, your priorities. Especially when you’re Princess and everyone keeps focusing on the way you look and the way you laugh and the way you fold your fucking napkins.

And now, the danger of that happening is a more immediate one. More immediate than ever.

But just as I finish that thought, I feel the need to stop midstep.

My ears prick up and my nose gets filled with their scent just as I feel them charging at me at full speed.

I don’t hesitate. I turn around and I let out a sigh, planting my feet firmly on the ground. Then I pull my right fist back and I punch the air in front of me.

The next second, three figures come to a screeching halt, as if out of thin air. Max and Hilde are just standing to his sides, but my brother is holding his hands to his chest, caught in the act of trying to shove me but still having the audacity to frown at me.

"Come on, Nyx," he moans as Hilde starts giggling, "why'd you always have to do that?"

I roll my eyes at him. "You mean, defend myself?" I ask flatly, my eyes locking with Max's as I give him a wink. I start walking back up the stairs. "Yeah, I know, it's such a bitch move."

I hear Max let out a laugh and it makes me feel a little better, especially when they start talking amongst themselves, Hilde initiating the inevitable conversation on how drunk everyone got.

We reach the top of the stairs and walk into the buzzing Common Room. A little too buzzing for *my* taste, I think as my eyes sweep over the enormous yet cozy round space sprawling before me. There are so many people standing and flitting around that I can barely see the dimly lit alcoves, the tall burgundy armchairs and the low ebony tables.

Maybe Max and I could just excuse ourselves and go straight up to my room?

But as soon as they spot us, the people greet us with another bout of loud cheering and clapping, and Max turns to throw a happy grin at me. We did *just* get engaged after all, I think as I return a smile.

So I make myself suffer through another round of congratulating.

And once we're done, we're already walking to our spot, making our way down the plush burgundy carpet and across the vaulted room, the moonlight falling through the stained-glass windows creating mesmerizing geometric shapes beneath our feet.

Just as we're almost there, I see some freshman move to take a seat at our table, in the most spacious alcove right opposite the entrance.

I glance at Max, but he doesn't have to bother. I hear a hiss from my left and I look in the direction of the sound, only to see one of Countess Koenig's many daughters throwing daggers at the freshman, fangs flashing.

He stops midstep, glances at the four of us walking straight towards him and doubles back in an almost comical way. I guess, as Princess, this is something I'll have to get used to as well.

"Isn't this nice?" Nikolay says with a content sigh as he throws himself into his plush velvet armchair. "And now that we've seen all the Fiáin

students…”

He throws us all a grin as we get settled into our seats. “Tomorrow, when they bring the betting board out, what's it gonna be?”

“Exciting,” I hear Hilde exclaim.

“Final score,” Max asks, “or which players will make it to the last Game?”

“Let’s do the final score,” Nikolay says with a mischievous smile.

“I think our Academy will win,” Hilde rushes to answer. “Don’t *you*, Max?”

“Is that how you think this is done?” he asks, throwing an incredulous smile in my direction.

Nikolay leans closer to her to explain, “You need to say how many players will be left by the end of the Fifth Game.”

“Of course,” she says, smiling as she face-palms herself. But then she frowns. “Ours or theirs?”

I have to fight not to start laughing and I only end up blowing one subtle chuckle through my nose.

I see Max roll his eyes, but Nikolay stays with her. “Both, for crying out loud,” he tells her. “The winner is the Academy with more players left, right? So it wouldn’t mean anything if you just said we’d have three players left, not unless you say that the shifters will only have one.”

Hilde is still a little tipsy so she just lets out a little chuckle and says, “I see. Then I say it’ll be twenty to eighteen in our favor.”

“Perfect,” Nikolay replies. “My guess is thirty to eight. What about you, Nyx?”

I just shrug my shoulders. “How in the name of Lilith would we even be able to make a guess? There’s a hundred of us on each side.”

“I neither know nor care what your method will be, oh sister darling.”

“I say forty nine to three,” Max cuts in. “In favor of Grimm Academy, of course.”

I turn to look at him with my eyebrows raised and a slight smile on my lips. “Optimistic.”

“Well, their Academy is dirt poor, their players were all chosen by their wacky Pied Piper instead of a series of tests like *we* were, *and…”* He leans a little forward to rest his forearms on his thighs. “Let’s just say I have a hunch.”

“Wow,” I chuckle, “you’ve actually managed to list all the most *irrelevant* factors possible.”

“Make your own guess then,” Nikolay challenges me.

“I’m sticking to what I’ve already said.”

“Which is nothing,” Max protests.

“Well, excuse me, but have you ever looked up any of the previous Games? Because *I* have. In 1852, the Academies were so tied, it all came down to two people. The very next year, our Academy was so much stronger, we ended up having two Games instead of five. It’s all so unpredictable. What kind of game will the Box throw up tomorrow? We’ve no idea. How many of us will make it into the Second Game? We’ve no idea. Not to mention the most important factor of them all.” I pause for effect. “We may have *seen* them all, but we know *nothing* about our opponents.”

By the time I finish my rant, they’re all looking at me as if I’m some tiresome adult who’s just taken their toy away from them.

“Thanks, Mom,” Nikolay says mockingly. I look to Max for assurance, but he just shrugs his shoulders with a grin on his face.

“Fine,” I spit out. “If we’re basing this on nothing at all, then fifty one to forty nine, in favor of Grimm Academy.”

And I lean back in my chair, folding my arms and feeling myself start to fume, but Max catches that, leans a little forward and says, so Nikolay and Hilde can hear him as well, “I think you’ll be a little more excited about it all once you find out how much money I already put on you staying until the end.”

Now that makes me frown, a smile dancing on my lips. “You didn’t. And the betting hasn't even started yet.”

“I have my ways,” he adds with a smile from ear to ear, getting up and motioning for me to follow suit. “And you know how much I believe in you, cupcake,” he leans in to whisper.

I do, giving him a playful shove on his shoulder with a grin on my face. Hilde cheers and I catch a funny look that Nikolay throws me, but I’m feeling too good for it to bother me.

And I guess it’s time for us to go up to my room, but before we do, Hilde leans a little forward to tell me, all flustered with excitement, “Nikolay says Irina told him she’s expecting both of you to make her proud tomorrow.”

Fuck, I think as my own excitement deflates somewhat.

And I give her a forced smile and I let Max lead me away from our spot and through the crowd..

But all I can think about now is the pressure. Suffice to say, in the entire history of the Games, there hasn't been a single Romanov that hasn't made it into the Second Game.

And I sure as hell don't want to be the first. I know I'd never hear the end of it.

*

When I wake up in the morning, Max is no longer in my bed. Instead of him, I find a single black rose with a note saying, "Last night was amazing, cupcake. I'll be coming to get you in time for the Game. Love, Max."

I roll around in bed, looking out the window as my mind swarms with impressions of yesterday's events. The Opening Ceremony, the party, the engagement…

It surprises me, when, of all things, I choose to linger on Hilde's words. "You've probably already done it, haven't you?" she asked, referring to the kiss.

My eyebrows pull down. Why would she just assume? Giving someone the kiss is the most intimate thing of all, more serious than marriage itself.

Even Max, who, as it turns out, expected me to give it to him last night, saying we're as good as married, didn't insist after I told him I'm not ready for that yet.

And what's wrong with waiting until marriage? Once we get married, we'll get even closer than we are now. And sex in general will get better as well. I imagine it the way it was before my… *troubles*. Before all the fights and before I became so self-conscious about it all. No, better, I tell myself, it'll be *better* than that. It will be about *us*, and the kiss will come then. I'll be ready, I'm sure of it.

I spend the next couple of minutes reliving our conversation, the one right before we made love. And it was so tender, the way he consoled me about my future as Princess, reminding me that the two of us won't be like the other Princes and their wives. I'm marrying a man who knows and gets me and will give me all the support I need in becoming exactly the kind of princess I want to be.

An image of the tundra pops into my mind, the bleak colors and the comforting inhospitality of my ancestral land.

“After we’re married, I want us to go spend like six months at my family’s Winter Palace,” I told him after we agreed we’d have the wedding in May, my favorite month of the year.

And it was so eager, the look he gave me when he said yes, that it all made me feel so much better about everything.

But right now, I’ve no time to be contemplating the future. I’ve got more pressing things to do. So I spring from my bed, I get dressed and I draw the curtains.

And it’s everyday that I do this, but today is no ordinary day.

It’s neither my regular clothes nor my training outfit I’m wearing. The uniform I’ve squeezed myself into is charcoal silversilk, fabric known for being the top choice of the deadliest Originals in our lands. And on my back, there is the luxuriously embroidered green and gold sigil of my Academy.

Frowning, I come to sit cross-legged in front of the altar in my room. There’s practically no light coming through the curtains and the only sound I hear is the ticking of the clock beside the open window. It’s almost noon and I don’t have a lot of time before I have to show up for the start of the First Game.

My eyes sweep over the low, carved table in front of me. In the center, there’s the fat, white candle. To the left, the miniature wooden spinning wheel. And to the right, the shallow brass bowl filled with blood.

Like every day since I was five years old, I prepare to do what every vampire needs to do to keep his powers from fading away. Renew the vow made to the gods that give them. But today it can’t be the automatic act it normally is.

An image pops into my head, an image evoked by a line I read in the History of Grimm Academy. The Games of 1861, when “the First Game was so brutal, the Grimm Academy hospital became so overcrowded, they had to start sending the injured to the nearest medical facility.”

Today, I’m to participate in one of those. And sure, it won’t *kill* me. But that’s basically all it’s not allowed to do.

So it’ll make all the difference, how I do in the Ring. To my life, whether I get to keep all my limbs. To my family, whether I disappoint them. And to myself, whether I prove worthy.

I take a deep, nervous breath and I start the first ritual. I light the candle and for the millionth time these past few days, I think of what to ask of God

of Death, the first of the Holy Trinity. The fact pains me, but today, using my magic to conceal the scars on my forearm is out of the question.

Sadly, that doesn't make it any easier to feel determined about the choice I'm about to make. Who knows what I'm going to need? The Obscura keeps its secrets until the very last moment, so the players never get to know what will be expected of them beforehand. And even once the Game starts, you still first have to figure out the rules.

I force myself to go with the power I'd already concluded was the best choice for me. General body stealth. I take a deep breath and I do it.

Give me a light step, oh God of Death, and one day, I'll walk away with you into the unknown.

I open my eyes and I snuff out the candle. In that very moment, I feel a surge of power rush through my body, for a split second making it disappear into the folds between realities. It's intoxicating because it's there that all power ultimately resides, in the nothingness that the gods have chosen to retreat into.

I inhale deeply, settle back in and move on to the miniature wooden spindle to the left of the candle. I don't have Mind Magic, but as my father used to say, it's good to address the gods even when you've nothing to ask of them. Vampires are said to be greedy and I can see exactly how that came to be, but not my father. No one could ever have said that about my father, I think with a pang of grief shooting through me.

I snap out of it and with one swift movement, I make the spinning wheel go round and round. As soon as it stops, I lift my finger to it and I prick it on the little spindle to the front, addressing the God of Dream.

Thank you, God of Dream, for making me your child.

And there has been no transaction between us, so there's no rush of power following my words. Just comforting silence that makes it clear to me that I've been heard.

But I've no time to waste, I think as my mind rushes back to the impending doom that is the start of the Games. And I still have the most important thing left to do.

So I turn my eyes to the blood-filled bowl. To ask the God of Flow to grant me further use of Blood Magic. Blood, to put it clumsily, is the lifeblood of all vampires. And it doesn't renew or even pump on its own. After all, it's not ours. Every single drop was gifted to us by the original vampire. And it's this god vampires get their reputation from. Hungry for

life, hungry for power. It's the darkest, most seductive source of power we have.

I place the finger I've just pricked above the bowl and I squeeze a few drops of blood out.

Give me mastery of the Flow, oh God of Flow, and I vow to use your blood to rise above nations.

As soon as the third drop falls and I see the little concentric circles it creates, I feel their echo deep inside my body.

My fingers and toes tingling, I quickly get my knife out of its holster and slice into my forearm. The blade thirstily drinks up all the blood, the otherwise hidden carvings in it coming to life, glowing with a soft, blue hue.

I watch them, feeling warm blood drip down my skin. By doing this, I'm renewing my bond with my knife, so I can use my Blood Magic on the drops it has drunk.

For a second, I think how bad it would be for me to have to use this, for people to *see* me using it.

But I shrug it off. What will be, will be. No point fretting over it right *now*.

Having completed all my rituals, I let myself get lost in my own thoughts for a second. Thinking of the competition I'm about to go through and all the stakes that come with it.

Win, I want to win, now more than ever. It'll be much sooner than I thought, me becoming Princess, and I want to enter that era of my life having earned my future people's respect.

It's at that exact moment that I hear a sharp knock at my door. Max, here to escort me to the Arena. With rushed movements, I grab the thick leather bracelet off the table and I use it to cover up my scars.

*

As soon as we walk out of Lilith Tower, we get swallowed by the crowd waiting to see the players off. It's thickest around the Dame Gothel statue, but even here, it's suffocating. There are students chanting my fiance's name and I throw a little glance at him, my lips curling into a smile. He looks so serious and handsome in his own charcoal silversilk uniform, it almost makes me forget about the world around us.

Until I see a light frown scrunch up his forehead and he gestures for the spectators to get the fuck out of our way. They do, parting into two mostly

neat rows by the sides of the gravel path that we're starting on. I look up, my eyes scanning the sky.

There it is, in the distance. The top of the huge glass dome of the Arena we're about to fight in.

"Excited?" I hear Max ask.

I turn to look at him and I give him a nod, smiling and taking a deep breath. Everything is falling into place.

We keep making our way through the crowd and past the Dame Gothel statue. It was only last night we had the little welcome party here. Today, it's where the food and merch stalls start.

It makes me feel excited, seeing all the bright colors and interesting knick knacks. Literally every stall has the scarves, green and gold for Grimm, red and silver for Fiáin Academy.

Letting myself get distracted by the cacophony of sounds, smells and sights, I don't look up from the trinkets until we're almost in front of the Arena.

I have to crane my neck to properly take it all in. While the glass dome is a modern addition, one that rids the staff of the need to use magic to keep the elements out, the rest of the Arena is ancient. I slow to a stop, feeling Max side-eye me impatiently. But I normally never have time to come here, so I take a moment to admire the well-preserved but seemingly crumbling arches in the style of the Colosseum, trying to picture what it looked like to people centuries ago. Some say the Arena is older than the underground part of the castle, but I never believed that. If it weren't for the castle's magical heart, these grounds would never have caught the Originals' eyes.

We keep walking, reaching the fork in the path right in front of the Arena. If we went right, we'd be led to the massive metal-studded double door that is the main entrance.

Instead, we take the path to the left and soon find ourselves to the back of the Arena, approaching one of the staff waiting to let us through the entrance reserved for the players.

"Go around the left and you'll see the Grimm Academy entrance," the petite girl tells us as she opens the much smaller door for us. "And good luck," she says and throws Max a shy smile.

We make our way through the curving hallway until I see another staff member waving us over. "Hurry up, it's about to begin," he tells us.

We do as he says, seeing a whole crowd of Grimm students waiting at the end of the hallway. Right behind them is the door to what we call the waiting room, where players usually get ready for their competitions in the Arena. And to the right, there's the door into the Ring. I spot Nikolay watching us approach.

“Ready to kick some butts?” my brother asks with a smile.

“Always,” Max replies.

“Good luck, Nick,” I say in a serious voice, my attention still on his high spirits.

A little too high, they are. I look around, stealing glances of the other players. And we’re all skilled. After all, there’s thousands of students at Grimm Academy and the three of us have made it into the top one hundred. But some of the other people here, they look downright terrifying. Scars across their bodies, frowns that could turn you to stone, fists clenching in a way that makes you imagine eyes being squeezed out of their sockets.

And who knows what kind of powers the other team is about to showcase. I guess that’s why Nikolay’s attitude is rubbing me the wrong way.

But it’s at that exact moment that the door opens and the silence of the hallway immediately gets switched out for loud, unbridled chatting of thousands of people inside the Arena.

As if out of nowhere, de Groot appears in the doorway, throws a glance at us and motions for us to follow.

We do, starting to file out of the hallway in a perfect two by two.

As I walk through the door, I take the opportunity to look around the Ring. It’s an oval of beaten earth the size of three football fields, closed off by a high wall and empty except for the chair for the Guardian of the Obscura, which they've placed beneath the wall to the center.

Once we’re all out, for a second, there’s absolute silence, only magnified by the size of the Ring.

Then the crowd goes wild, its thunderous chanting pounding in my ears as I put one foot in front of the other, fighting the urge to lift my arm to shield my eyes from all the flashes.

My heart throbbing, I let my eyes sweep over the Ring we’re walking down and then the bleachers rising up from behind the wall and high, high into the air. I can't see them, but I know everyone who counts for anything

is here today, watching. It's dizzying and not exactly pleasant, being the center of *this* kind of attention.

So when the door on the other side of the Ring opens, I welcome the distraction. Just as our team comes to a stop near the center, the Fiáin one starts marching inside.

Once again, the crowd goes wild, and I see the opposing team's Archon give a wave of her hand. But it's not Archon, Cerys or Brogan that the crowd starts chanting.

It's something else.

And I don't manage to make out the name, but then I spot that alpha strolling next to her, throwing wide smiles at all the people sucking up to him. Mostly women, judging by the voices and the way everyone leered at him at the party. I sense Max tense up next to me.

What snaps me out of it is the opposing team coming to a stop and all eyes snapping to the man walking into the space between us.

It's Uncle Ludwig, wearing his ceremonial robe and carrying the Box in his hands. It's at the very center of the Ring that he stops and clears his throat.

"Welcome," I hear his voice boom from the speakers as his eyes sweep over the bleachers. "Welcome to the first Games after a pause of *one hundred and fifty six* years."

I hear loud cheering and clapping all around me.

Uncle raises a hand to silence them. "Now," he says as he turns back to the audience. He motions at the Box in his hands. "We all know what it is I'm holding in my hands. For over a decade, it's been an honor and a privilege to keep this safe. After all, it was made by Dame Gothel, one of the most famous faes of all time, all in the hopes of creating an alliance between our then newly founded Academies. Now, over a century later…" He pauses for effect. "We find ourselves in need of forging that alliance anew."

There's a murmur of approval from the audience.

"Luckily for all of us," Uncle continues in a more cheerful yet a little forced tone, "the Brothers Grimm, as well as the rest of the founders of the Alliance, they all liked to have fun, so it will be by playing five Games throughout the course of the following year that we'll be doing that."

I hear weak laughter here and there.

Uncle awkwardly clears his throat. “So,” he says as he turns his eyes to the principals standing there, the silence now deafening, “Pied Piper, Archon, will you do us the honor and activate the Box?”

The two smile, walk up to him and shake hands, making the Box glow.

I hear the crowd break out into thunderous cheering as we watch them leave the Ring to take their seats in the Pied Piper’s booth, but at the same time, the only thing I *can* hear is the pounding of my own heart in my ears.

Uncle opens the Box, slides his hand inside, takes something out and flings it into the air, Hourglass coming to hover above us all.

“Before we begin,” Uncle says, making people around me let out impatient grumbles, “let me go over the rules for you all. What the Game is, you'll have to figure out for yourselves. But no matter where it takes place and no matter what the Box comes up with, you begin when the sand starts running and you finish when it stops running. You can do whatever you want, *except* for intentionally trying to injure others or trying to collaborate with them. The Box will know and will zap you out of the Game if you break either of those two rules. It will also zap you out if you tap your chest three times, signaling you want out, or if you get too close to getting killed.”

He pauses before he says with a nod, “That's all. Now, without further ado, I give you…” The last bit he yells out. “Your First Game.”

Instantly, two large, round goalposts appear on each side of the Ring and remain floating in the air, two scoreboards in gilded frames hovering above them. I sense thousands of heads snapping left right.

Then, the ground beneath us starts to shake, there’s this loud rumbling noise coming from it, and out burst dozens of stone shields of some kind, painted in our Academies’ colors. They remain levitating in the air, evenly spaced out throughout the Ring.

What the…

For a second, there’s silence, all eyes turning back to the Box.

Then, from its small rectangular opening, stuff comes flying out at record speed.

Glowing metal balls. And there are so many and they’re so fast, it sends my mind into overdrive.

I sense the players around me start to squirm, but before I can even process what’s going on, Uncle goes to take his seat, I see Hourglass flip and I hear the sand starting to run, marking the start of the Game.

*

For a second, I stay frozen in place, my mind buzzing. I'm only vaguely aware of the tense silence all around me as I watch the balls come to an abrupt stop and remain hovering in the air, peaceful and unmoving.

My heart skips a beat.

Then they move again and I flinch. But it's slow and lazy, the way they start buzzing around.

Still, it makes everyone around me get a move on. I sense Max and Nikolay break off from our group, Max walking into my line of sight. His eyes are fixed above. He's watching, frowning. But my attention is on the balls, my gaze drawn by the one making a left around one of the stone shields, then the one diving down a little and almost touching the ground, then the one buzzing past one of the Fiáins.

Buzzing… almost like bees.

It's only when one of the Grimms, a vampire girl I don't know, almost slams into me that I snap out of it. She throws me a frown and turns her attention back up, continuing to move like a predator.

I look around and realize I'm the only one from our team still standing where we found ourselves when the gong sounded. The rest have all dispersed across the Ring, along with the Fiáins. And no one has made the first move yet, but they all look as tense as if they're about to.

Come on, Nyx, I tell myself.

My fingers hovering right above my knife holster, I start walking, slowly, fixing my eyes on one of the balls again. I take a deep breath, imagining the silence in the room I usually train in, and all the noise in my head finally subsides.

What remains is the Game and the Game only.

I assume I need to avoid the shields, I think as I watch the ball make a lazy U-turn around one of them. But what's the point? What am I supposed to do here?

I frown. It can't be about catching the balls. That would be too simple, right?

Just as I think that, I see one of the Fiáins approach the one I have my eyes on.

I stop midstep.

For a second, he hesitates, but then he leaps up into the air, his arm swung back.

Instinctively, I jump back.

Time slows down as I watch the ball stop, stay still for a second and then start spinning in place like crazy, producing a disgustingly loud machine-gun type of noise.

The next thing I know, the ball is merrily buzzing away while the shifter is lying on the ground, wailing as he clutches his thigh.

The silence that ensues is thunderous. For a second, it feels as if it's finally gotten to everyone's heads. This is *real*.

I gulp, my eyes rounding as they sweep over the guy's body, seeing more puncture wounds than I can count, the one on the thigh heavily bleeding out.

There's a murmur from the audience as he gets zapped out of the Game.

And I'm vaguely aware of the rest of the players having stopped to watch the incident in tense silence.

But once the wounded one is out of the Ring, there's a sudden and dramatic shift in the atmosphere.

Playtime is over, I think as I force myself to keep moving, my hand hovering above my knife holster as I scan my surroundings.

All of a sudden, there are one hundred and ninety nine individuals getting a move on. I hear cracking sounds and my head snaps to my left to watch a fae-blooded Grimm summon a shield to defend himself. I see a blur dart past him, my eyes following it to see a girl from my House starting to chase one of the balls. And my nose gets filled with a familiar musky scent as I watch a couple of Fiains jump up, shift midair and hit the ground running, separating so as not to break the rules.

Apparently, the goal *is* to catch the balls, I think as I keep stalking across the Ring. It's just that the balls themselves have magic and *will* attack you if you try.

Observe, I first need to observe some more.

I scan my surroundings for the girl from my House, eager to see what the plan is. I spot her just as the ball she's chasing stops and turns to her, moving to attack. She deftly evades it, spins around and tries to catch it.

Hoping to do it quicker than the ball can react?

I stop, my eyebrows shooting up and anticipation making my breath shallow.

But before I can even process what's going on, the ball is already vibrating and the next thing I know, it's buzzing around her and she's

screaming.

The sound makes blood curdle in my veins, but I can't tear my eyes away. The ball is getting a chain of light wrapped around the girl and the chain is cutting into her skin, threatening to slice her into pieces.

The scream gets louder, the only sound beside the throbbing of my own heart in my ears.

Fucking shit, isn't this supposed to stop as soon as a student gets in mortal danger?

I sense other students stopping to watch and I glance around, wondering if I'm supposed to do something.

But it's at that exact moment that the ball stops, the girl drops to the ground and the Box zaps her out of the Ring.

As I watch, terror seeps deep into my bones. I have to fight the urge to go look for Nikolay and Max. Instead, I keep stalking around the Ring, trying to come up with a plan.

So far, I know that the balls have magic and it's not just one type, based on what's just happened. I also know you can't rely on catching them before they have time to react. They're just too fast.

What if I used my stealth? Would that help me catch them off guard?

Time is running out, I remind myself as I scan my surroundings. I don't know how long we have left because Hourglass won't show that, but I have to get a move on.

So I take a deep breath and I zero in on one of the balls, but it's just then that my eye gets drawn to one of ours, a fae-blooded guy who's just managed to trap one of the balls using Air Magic.

I stop, watching the ball squirm inside the air balloon he's created around it.

My eyebrows shoot up. Clever, making sure he doesn't even need to touch it. And I can already see him driving the air balloon through one of the goalposts.

But the next second, the ball inside the balloon stops squirming, and it pushes down and through the barrier, slamming straight into the ground.

My heart skips a beat and I see the guy's eyes round in surprise.

But before he can do anything, the ball comes charging up, releasing some foul gas that envelops the fae completely.

I jump back as soon as I see the cloud of smoke drawing closer, the guy inside coughing and trying to yell something as he runs.

Help, he's calling for help.

Fuck this shit, I think to myself and I move to try to save him without even knowing how.

But as he whizzes past me, he gets too close to one of the other balls and the next thing I know, we have three of them flying straight at us.

The buzzing, their buzzing is so angry. Run, run the fuck away, I curse at myself.

Just as one of them gets too close for comfort, I do a flip, throwing myself on the ground and rolling away.

I land on one knee, push myself up and break into a sprint.

My heart pumping wildly, I throw a glance over my shoulder and I slam into something, hard.

The crash makes me stumble back and look up.

And there he is, the alpha, standing in front of a shield, as still as if the impact didn't even make him budge. There's a frown on his face. I open my mouth to say sorry, but I see his eyes dart to a spot behind my back and we both duck.

I hear one of the balls whiz past and then I see it, flying straight at the shield behind his back.

But before it can even touch it, it comes to a screeching halt, turns and flies away.

I hear the alpha say something. "You okay?" I think that's what he's asking me.

But I don't take my eyes away from the shield behind him. I lift my finger to my lips, shushing him as my mind starts exploding with the realization.

And I jump to my feet and I get moving again.

Because it's finally hit me, what the Game is.

*

I'm trying to focus, but the goddamn alpha is making it really hard. I'm in a low crouch on top of one of the shields, my legs spread as wide as they can be, my forearms resting on my knees lightly as I keep my eyes peeled on the strip of air between this one and the shield right across it. If I'm fast enough, I should be able to do it, easy.

There's only the matter of the asshole messing with my concentration ever since I bumped into him. I felt him follow me until I found the next

target. I saw him watch when I leapt up into the air and ran over the ball in as wide a circle as I could, to check whether it had a blind spot.

And now, once I've made sure it really can't detect me when I'm positioned above it, now he's standing there, waiting for my next move like a hawk. But to make things even worse, he's leaned against the shield with his arms casually crossed, as if this is some kind of movie night for him.

Fucker.

I shrug it off and keep waiting, every muscle in my body tense with anticipation. I still can't believe I thought the shields were just obstacles for the players. And I can't keep track of what's going around me, except register, now and then, a distant explosion or scream or whipping sound or the like. But I know I'm right, I just know it.

And not just because of what popped into my head when I saw the ball do everything in its power *not* to collide with the shield. The section in that book on Nature Magic about this special kind of metal that loses all magic charge when it comes into contact with the earth. It's also because of, well, a gut feeling.

So when I finally see a ball buzzing towards me, I have to force myself to keep it together, to keep my breathing and my mind and my body steady.

And just as it's about to whiz past, I move as if I'll jump down, grab onto the top of the shield with my hands and catch the ball tightly between my thighs. It instantly starts thrashing like crazy, making me grit my teeth with effort, but I keep it pressed firmly and unforgivingly against the stone from which I'm hanging.

For one long moment, the ball keeps thrashing, putting such strain on my muscles, it feels as if they're tearing.

But then it stops, suddenly and totally, and I exhale and I relax my muscles a little, letting the ball drop to the ground.

I do the same, already picturing sending it flying through the goal post.

But when my boots hit the ground and I push myself up, I find myself face to face with the goddamn alpha. He's smiling, his arms still folded in that annoyingly casual way.

My eyes narrow. I throw the quickest glance down to the ground and see he's got my ball trapped under his boot.

"That's *mine*," I say through gritted teeth.

"Say you're sorry and I'll let you have it," he says in that smooth, easy voice of his.

I frown. “What’re you talking about?”

He motions back to where I slammed into him. “Don’t even remember?” he asks in a teasing voice. “Breaks my heart.”

“Fine, I’m sorry,” I drawl, the delay getting me more annoyed by the second. Then I shoot him a mocking look. “Sorry you’re such a snowflake.”

And I gesture for him to get the fuck away from my ball, but he just asks, “Something wrong with snowflakes?”

I let out a frustrating breath. “Not very challenging to beat. Now get off my fucking ball.”

Apart from his smile growing wider, he straight-up ignores that last bit. “Beat? Who says *I* wouldn’t beat *you*?”

“*I* do.”

His eyes narrow, and it’s with a knowing smile that he whispers, “What, you only let princes do that, Shadowscape girl?”

It feels like a slap across the face. *And* it means he knows who I am.

“Well,” he starts as he leans a little closer, but doesn’t let go of my ball, “I’m definitely *not* one, but I have a feeling I’d be more fun to be beaten *by*.”

His voice is seriously hot, but the tone is intentionally seductive as well. I frown. Is he fucking hitting on me? Right here in the Ring? And he’s convinced I won’t be able to resist him, I can tell by the look in his eyes. It makes me so pissed, I decide I won’t let this slide without at least a pinch of humiliation.

So I give him a slightly shy, but obviously flirty smile.

He pulls away a little, looking at me from an angle, saying, “Wow, you *can* do something other than frown after all.”

I take a step back and I make my voice as silky smooth as I can. “I guess you’re funny.”

Chapter 4 - Dahrian

Funny, Shadowscape girl says as she takes a tentative step back, throwing me a softer look from those big, dark eyes. I follow her. “Glad you think so,” I say, ignoring my fox nudging me to get even closer so he can get another whiff. “What’s your name?” I ask her.

She just looks at me for a second. “I think you know it,” she says. That makes me frown. “But you first,” she demands.

My lips curl into a smile. So thin and small, yet such a big presence she is, with that mane of tangled black hair framing her sharp face. “Dahrian,” I say as I look deeper into her eyes, “but you can call me whatever you want.”

I think I see her blush and it sends my heart racing a little, my fox grumbling to be let closer.

“Well, *Dahrian*,” she starts sweetly, my name on her lips sounding so good, but then, just like that, she disappears.

I don’t have time to react. The next thing I know, she’s slamming my body into the shield behind me, her forearm pressed tightly against my chest as something round and thrashing is trapped between my back and the cold stone.

It renders me speechless and unmoving, the close up of her eyes — narrowed and piercing, deep and cold. “Thanks for making this easy,” she whispers with a smirk just as the ball stops thrashing.

My eyebrows shooting up, I open my mouth, but she releases me and deftly catches the ball as it starts falling down to the ground, successfully neutralized.

Still speechless, I watch her zap herself away from me, seeing her reappear right in front of one of the goalposts. The very next moment, she's leaping into the air, her arm swung back.

Everyone around me seems to stop what they're doing.

The second she gets the ball through the hoop, a gong sounds and the scoreboard above shows a flashing number one.

I watch her land on her feet, as deftly as a little vixen, as the crowd breaks out into thunderous cheering. One zero for Grimm Academy.

The very next second, she's zapped out of the Ring and onto the bleachers.

But it doesn't snap me out of it, not fully.

The little vixen, she set me a little trap, and I walked straight into it.

Color me charmed.

"Hey," I hear Ricky call out as he runs past me. He turns so he's running backwards, shoots me a look and yells, "Come on," right before he turns back around and keeps going.

He's right, I think as I look down, thinking I'll find the ball she neutralizes first still lying on the ground. But it's gone, someone obviously having grabbed the opportunity. I go straight back to looking for more, scanning the Ring as I jog.

There aren't a lot of players left. Out of the initial two hundred, maybe eighty or so. And some of them are in their animal form while some are casting magic at this very moment, but they all seem wrung out.

Still, now that *she* did it, it seems that everyone's caught onto what we're supposed to be doing in the first place. I can tell by the way most of them stop avoiding the shields, instead starting to crowd the center of the Ring.

Many of them got destroyed and there's not that many balls left, so if I don't hurry up, I won't be catching anything at all, be it a night with a feisty little vixen or one of those fucking points.

Keep the peace and stay until the end, Brogan's voice rings in my head.

And I finally do it. I get in the zone. And I choose to stick with the original decision, to not even try to shift due to the sheer size of my fox. But then I spot a ball and I come up with the perfect way to make it slam into one of those shields.

*

I'm in the bleachers, sitting in one of the spots reserved for Fiains who've finished the Game. My focus is as sharp as a knife as my eyes dart from the Ring to one of the screens showing close-ups of the Game to the audience. It's all going much faster now, players scoring points left and right, the scoreboards changing every couple of minutes.

I catch O'Malley Senior getting a ball through the hoop. My lips curl into a smile, my gaze automatically flitting over to where the little vixen is sitting.

A pang of disappointment shoots through me when I see she's out of my line of sight.

That quickly changes into excitement when my men and women keep scoring points like crazy.

Now that they know what they're doing, they're unstoppable, their beasts manipulating the balls into slamming into the shields and keeping them pressed against them until they're neutralized with such ease, it's a delight to watch.

At one point, the screen shows Brogan's face. To my surprise, she's not smiling. She's frowning, her lips pressed tight.

But the score on the board keeps changing from second to second, five to one, seven to two, twelve to two. All in our favor.

I watch Fiona catch a neutralized ball and I grin, waiting for her to throw it through the goalpost.

But this time, the ball explodes.

I frown, jumping from my chair. What the… They're supposed to be harmless once they've been neutralized.

I keep standing there, waiting for someone to intervene. On the other hand, maybe it's part of the game…

Then it happens again.

And again.

I clench my fists, all the muscles in my body tensing up as my fox starts emitting a growl.

If it's part of the game, it would be a bitch move to stop it.

Reluctantly, I move to get back into my chair.

When it happens again. And this time, the scream of one of my pack is so piercing, I fail to stop myself. O'Malley Junior. It was O'Malley Junior.

No, this can't be part of the Game. I make a snap decision. I jump over a few people nestled in their chairs, I land on the little path between the rows and I start running straight back into the Ring.

Just as I'm about to leap over the wall, a voice coming from the speakers makes me come to a screeching halt.

"Enough," I hear Brogan order in a stern, determined and a little aggressive voice. I see all the players stop what they're doing and start turning around, looking for the source of the sound.

"The Game is officially over," she declares.

I hear a murmur coming from all around me, booing as well as loud agreement, but I don't give a fuck. I change my course, starting to move to the booth where Brogan and their Pied Piper are sitting.

I see her walk out of there, a pissed-off look on her face. She catches my eye, growls, "I'll take care of it," and pushes past me.

I watch her march down to the Guardian's spot. I see him sitting there, looking all innocent. Ludwig something. Ricky did tell me, I just didn't commit it to memory. But now, I think as my eyes narrow into slits, now that I know there's a game he's playing, I'll *learn*.

And I keep standing there, throwing daggers at the guy, wanting to see Brogan give him what he deserves.

But the very next moment, the people all around me start getting up, I hear more than one monotonous voice explaining where all the exits are, and I realize we're being thrown out of the Arena.

Fuck. But there's nothing I can do about it, so I start leaving, scanning the crowd for members of my pack.

As I leave, somewhere near the main entrance, I spot the little vixen. I squint to take a better look, but the very next second, someone takes her by the upper arm. A tall, dark figure with a frown on his face. That vampire prince. He leans in for a kiss.

My eyebrows pull down.

I guess it was the prince's fiance I've just tried flirting with.

Chapter 5 - Nyx

My mind buzzing, I follow Max back to Lilith Tower. The sounds of all those people screaming are still echoing through my mind. But it's the whispers I heard afterwards that are even more disturbing. Someone rigging the very first Game and that someone being no other than Uncle Ludwig.

My mind lingers on him. He's one of those people I've known my entire life, but now that I think about it, I know practically nothing about him. He's a Professor here, he teaches Blood Magic, he likes Schwarzwald cake and he's the Guardian of the Obscura.

I barely notice it when we get to the Common Room. We have to elbow our way to our spot, that's how many people have come to discuss the explosive, unexpected end of today's event. But right now, I don't mind. In fact, I'm *grateful* for the feverish chatter.

Because it's kind of terrifying to think about, the possibility of the whispers being true. Uncle aside, that's how it all started a hundred and fifty six years ago. And by the end, there were so many casualties, there was barely anyone left.

It's Hilde who snaps me out of it. She wiggles her way out of the crowd gathered around the betting board and throws Max a tentative smile. But it's me she comes to greet, looping her arm through mine and making me slow down a bit.

“Are you okay?” she asks in a low, worried voice, making my eyebrows pull down. “I saw that alpha giving you trouble.”

Blood instantly rushes to my face. I throw a glance at Max before I say in a voice barely above a whisper, “He wasn’t, don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t know,” she insists, “seemed like he was intentionally getting in your way. Maybe you should think about reporting it. You never know what someone’s strategy is.”

I have to fight to keep myself from raising my voice. “He wasn’t doing anything that’s not allowed.”

“Are you sure?” she asks, making me grit my teeth. “I mean, for a second, it almost looked like you were flirting, but then I saw you needed to use force.”

My ears burning, I throw another glance at Max. Thank gods he didn’t hear this, I think when I see him greeting people passing by. Still, I snap at my cousin a little, wanting her to drop it as soon as possible. “Well, who doesn’t need to use force during the Games?”

There’s a second of silence before she says, “Alright alright. I was just worried about you.” And she lets go of my arm, sulkily, just as we finally manage to elbow our way to our table.

There, Nikolay is already waiting for us. As soon as he spots Max, he eagerly sits up straighter.

“Bloody hell, guys,” my brother expels as the three of us throw ourselves into our chairs. “What the fuck just happened?”

“It’s simple,” I hear Max say.

My muscles aching even more now that I’m sprawled like this, I turn to look at him. There’s such smug conviction on his face as he declares, “Their players got too cocky.” Anger flashes through his eyes as he motions in the direction of the Arena. “Did you see them out there?”

I frown, but I don’t sit up. This is just too comfy for me to renounce it.

“Yeah,” Nikolay drawls, slowly nodding away without taking his eyes off Max. “I see what you mean. Could be, could be.”

“What’re you talking about?” I chuckle, sitting up after all. My eyes sweep over all three of them, but lock on Max’s. “I was watching the entire time. There was absolutely no recklessness in the way they were catching those balls. They’re really good,” I say with conviction. “Like, *really* good.”

“So what is it then?” Max leans back and drawls. “Enlighten us.”

And I don't really want to be repeating it, but it does sound like the only logical explanation. Not without hesitation, I find myself saying, "Someone rigged the whole thing."

"Oh come on," Max yells out, throwing his arms up and turning to throw me an incredulous stare. "You, too? Why the fuck would *we* need to rig the fucking Games?"

"The balls," I start through gritted teeth, trying to keep my cool, "they only started exploding once the *shifters* started taking the lead. *And*—"

"Bloody hell," my brother cuts me off, making me take a deep breath to calm myself. "I did hear one of the little Dukes say the same."

"So fucking what?" Max asks with a scoff.

"I don't know," Nikolay mutters, suddenly all confused. "I mean, I guess it's worth considering the idea."

"I think Max is right," Hilde chimes in. There's fear written all over her face. "If not…" Her voice gets a little choked up as she looks around for reassurance. "What would that even mean? Like, everything starting all over again? Will they cancel the Games or?"

"If they're smart—"

This time, it's Max who cuts me off. "They won't be cancelling the fucking Games, come on."

Embarrassment renders me speechless. As blood rushes to my cheeks, I try to catch his eye to see if he's going to acknowledge not letting me finish my sentence.

But then Nikolay spits out, "I think they should send those filthy shifters back to the hole they crawled out of."

I just blink at him for a second. Then my eyebrows pull down in a sudden burst of anger. "What the… Shouldn't you be more worried about your uncle?"

He frowns. "What the hell's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Remember, Nick," Hilde cuts in, "I heard that girl say he must have tampered with the Box."

"As if," my brother replies with a scoff. "The Box can't be *tampered* with."

"Nikolay," I start, catching his eye as I lean a little forward. "There are people in the hospital and everything's been put on pause. This is serious."

He just looks at me for a second. "Yeah," he says in that voice he uses when he thinks I'm being thick, "but it's Uncle."

I just blink at him. I open my mouth to say something, but all of a sudden, it all sounds ridiculous.

"Actually," Nikolay continues with a laugh, his eyes sweeping over all three of us, "it being Uncle, that would be the best possible scenario. We'd just get Mother to slap some sense into him."

Hilde laughs and I see Max's lips tug into a smile, but I just can't bring myself to find any of it funny. They're all getting on my nerves.

Strangely empty and disoriented, I just get up and wave my hand in a tired greeting.

"Where're you going?" I hear Max ask, sounding surprised.

I turn to look at him, finding his eyebrows raised at me slightly, almost instantly realizing I've gotten mad at him for no reason whatsoever. It's *Nikolay* who always interrupts me. I can't be taking it out on *Max*.

Feeling myself softening, I lean a little forward to whisper in his ear, "Give me an hour and come up to my room. We'll order food from the kitchens and I'll do that thing with my mouth that you love."

And I give him a peck on the cheek and I pull away to look at him.

Smiling and with one eyebrow quirked at me, he says, "I think we have a deal," grabs my hand and squeezes it tight, only letting go once I completely pull away.

*

That disorienting emptiness keeps following me out of the Common Room and up the stairs to my bedroom.

So when I find myself in front of my door, despite privacy and silence waiting on the other side, I realize it's another room I'm in need of.

Without a moment of hesitation, I walk back to the stairs and keep climbing, the tower becoming less crowded the higher I go.

Right at the top is my favorite room of all time. And it's all because of the painting. Becoming relaxed just thinking about it, I make my way past windows with lattice arches, the view of the world outside becoming more and more isolating. People out on the grounds turning into mere dots, trees into colorful, highly realistic toys, the Wall surrounding the castle a white snake winding its way through the deep, dark forest.

And just as the height becomes dizzying, I find myself at the very top. It looks like a regular rookery of ages past, back when the shifters still used the ravens they bonded with for sending letters.

I guess that's why students nowadays only ever use it to have sex, old condoms littering the weathered wooden floorboards.

But if you know what you're looking for…

I approach the space between two arched windows and I knock three times, lightly. There's a soft, but sudden sound of something unlocking within the stone and a door appears, retreating back to let me into a room the size of a shoebox.

It always makes me remember how I first discovered this. Back when my father died and my mother sent me to visit my aunt here at the Academy. I spent my days running around the grounds and getting in trouble, furious at the world without even knowing it.

Thinking of myself being so lost and vulnerable, I let out a soft scoff and I step inside. I close the door behind me and I let my body slide down its length, all the way to the floor.

And I fix my eyes on the painting, the very sight making my breathing calmer. It's just a very old portrait of a plain-looking vampire noblewoman posing in a lush green garden. Lady X, I call her. If it were now that I saw it for the very first time, I know I would've hated it. The way she's cinched into the tightest corset ever, making me wonder how she could even breathe. The way she has one hand outstretched and a handkerchief falling from it, as if she's about to ask for her smelling salts. But it's the way she looks at me that bothers me the most. That meek, subservient look in her eyes.

Although, sometimes, I do feel as if that's the way she is only when I'm looking. As if, sometimes, I can catch a fleeting change in her expression that makes me stop and wonder if I'm losing my mind.

But despite it all, she still has that effect on me. It was the first thing, after my father's death, that I came across that could make me stop and just… be.

For a second, I just remain sitting there, staring at the portrait as the emptiness grows inside me. And then, as soon as my mind rushes to the conversation I just had with the three of them, it turns sharp and red hot.

An image of my brother flickers before my eyes. "Yeah, but it's Uncle," his words echo in my mind. But it wasn't the words, it was the look in his eyes that rendered me speechless. Making me feel, once again, like a heartless, disloyal bitch for daring to think anything less than the very best of any of the *million* fucking members of our family.

Knowing no one can hear me, I let out a loud, angry cry, my hand automatically darting to my knife. Gritting my teeth, I whip it out of its holster and I start twirling it around my fingers.

I mean, is he stupid? It's not like I was *accusing* Uncle. But it'd be far from the first time someone from our family did something devious, treacherous or both just to settle an old grudge. And we all know that this might be one of them. After all, in the Umbrage, the Romanovs were among the more involved and more brutal families.

Still spinning my knife, I try to calm down, but it's just so infuriating. The Games have only just begun, this incident will probably turn out to be a mere coincidence, and even if it didn't, it's too soon to place blame on anyone.

But we're not a regular family, we Romanovs, especially now that I'm about to marry the prince. We have more power and therefore more responsibility than most other families. And that's exactly why it pisses me off so much, that they'd dismiss me like that, *laugh* at me, make *me* out to be the problem, when I'm the only one taking the responsibility seriously.

Gritting my teeth, I stop twirling my knife, I pull my hand back and I jab the tip into the skin on my left wrist.

It hurts, but not nearly enough. I drop the knife and I slam my forehead into my palms, swallowing an angry scream.

I miss him so much, my father, I think as tears start welling in my eyes and my anger turns into frustrated, inconsolable sadness. He was the only one who ever got me. And for a while, after he died, I thought I'd die as well. Then life went on and I found myself in this perpetually anxious, suspended state, all alone in the world, but I was going to school, doing my rituals, playing Thieves and Bloodhounds with the stable boys in the Summer Palace West Wing.

But never again did I feel as seen as I did when he'd appear out of nowhere in the middle of my tutoring session, steal me away from my begrudging governess and take me practicing my knife skills.

"I can't wait, Anastasya," he'd sometimes tell me, "to see what you're going to achieve."

And there was such conviction in his deep, dark eyes. Such warm, warm conviction.

I lower my hands and I look up, my face sticky with tears. And there's Lady X gazing at me with that meek look in her eyes.

But there's also the voice of that alpha echoing in my head. "What, you only let princes do that, Shadowscape girl?"

And then he flashes me that hot grin and I feel a twinge in my stomach.

Blood comes rushing to my cheeks, my hands balling into fists. What the fuck does *he* care about *my* fucking choices?

I let out a scoff.

But it's Hilde I'm pissed at. She's a smart girl, tougher than she looks, one of the best Mind Magic wielders I've ever come across. But instead of working on realizing her potential, she's willingly choosing to be the fucking mother hen, constantly sticking her nose in other people's business. No wonder she ends up drawing stupid conclusions like the one she drew today. It's sheer desperation.

Still, it's maddening, for her to have thought, even for a second, that that was actual flirting, what she saw out there in the Ring. A, I have my Max, or have you forgotten all about *that*, Hilde? That alpha can't even compare. B, I was in the middle of a fucking Game. And even if it weren't for A and B, even if His Hotness would ever show any actual interest in me outside trying to win, that's definitely not someone I can see myself falling for. I mean, he's obviously one of those not-a-care-in-the-world, my-nose-up-every-woman's-skirt kind of guy.

Me? I grit my teeth, I grab my knife off the floor and I jump to my feet. I'm Anastasya Konstantinova Romanova. And I have better things to do than worry about my stupid cousin and some Fiáin rando.

Yes, I have Games to win and a reputation to build. And I don't give a fuck what my brother thinks. While he's out eating and fucking himself to death, I'll be making sure we're covered in case the today's incident *doesn't* turn out to be a coincidence. And I'll start by doing some digging on our family's ties to the Games.

Chapter 6 - Dahrian

Struggling to keep my focus as my mind refuses to stop conjuring images of members of my pack dying in that fucking hospital wing, I'm rushing after Ricky, our footfalls muffled by the thick red carpet beneath our feet. We're walking down some seemingly random hallway in the Academy and I can't help but wonder where he's taking me.

But when I asked him to help me figure out what really happened at the Games, he said not to worry, he knew exactly where to look for answers. And besides, it's with good reason I've all but anointed him as my right hand. He's without a doubt the smartest, most reliable person I've ever met.

So I just keep walking after him. And we only take a couple of more turns before I find myself stepping into a huge vaulted anteroom with one silent, motionless person keeping guard at each side of an enormous wooden double door. Except for the door, everything around me is white marble, the man and woman dressed in plain but rich green uniforms with long button-down coats.

I slow to a stop, my eyes snapping up to see a large stone shield hanging right above the door. It's got the Grimm Academy crest carved into it and there's a scroll floating below with the words "Know yourself" written on it.

It's only then that I realize where we are and it makes my lips curl into a smile just as my friend stops to motion for me to keep following him. Of

course he'd be taking me to the Library. This is Ricky we're talking about, after all.

As soon as we approach the door, both guards move to meet us. We end up getting frisked in complete silence.

"We're going straight to the History section," Ricky whispers as soon as they open the door for us and we enter a huge, softly lit space with elaborately carved wooden bookshelves and a glass wall overlooking some kind of cave.

And there's a reception to our right, with a couple of Librarians in flowy green and gold robes, chatting away in hushed voices, but Ricky doesn't even glance in their direction. He just keeps walking as if he knows exactly where he's going.

I catch up with him to whisper, "How do you already know this place so well?"

He shoots me an amused smile. "This is where I spent most of last night." And he keeps walking.

I frown, but I welcome this little distraction. "You mean to tell me, the very night before the First Game, you chose to stay up so you could wander around a library you'll have a whole year to explore?"

He stops and clicks his tongue at me. I stop as well, smiling even before he playfully snaps, "Not 'a library'. *The* Library."

"What's so great about it?" I ask as we keep walking.

"Do you know what the Lexarcanum is?"

I think for a second. "Isn't that, like, a library where books choose people, not the other way around?"

"A library *section*, to be more exact," Ricky says as he turns his head to the side to throw me a grin. "But yes. And guess which Library it's part of."

I nod as it hits me. "I see."

"So *is* it surprising, really, that I had to start checking this place out as soon as we got here?" Ricky asks.

I let out a laugh as I clap him on the back, loudly. "So? What book did you get picked by? 'One Hundred Ways to Be Even Nerdier'?"

"Quiet," I hear someone's soft, slow voice sound from hidden speakers around us.

Ricky shoots me a frown. I raise my hands in defense and it turns into a stifled chuckle as he whispers, "Sadly, no. That part is restricted. But it just goes to show how cool this Library is."

And he waves for me to follow him into a row between two bookshelves marked History E-G and History G-H.

There, he grabs an incredibly large, dusty book off a shelf and keeps walking in the direction of the glass wall.

It's only once we step out from between the shelves that I realize there are students sitting all along the wall. They're sprawled in soft couches and armchairs placed around low coffee tables, some of them immersed in their work, others blatantly procrastinating.

It makes me want to linger, when I see one of the guys, fae-blooded by the looks of him, lying on the couch and using his Air Magic to keep his book floating before his eyes, turning pages as slowly and deftly as if he were using his fingers.

Ricky grabs us a spot at a table all the way to the left, carefully placing the dusty volume on its polished wooden surface as he lowers himself into the couch. I take the armchair opposite him, leaning forward to check out the book.

"History of Grimm Academy?" I ask with a frown. I catch his eyes. "Ricky, we've got seven brothers and sisters in that hospital wing, O'Malley Junior's fucking arms blown off. That book doesn't seem to be the ideal choice for what I'm interested in."

Ricky clicks his tongue and cracks the book open, its heavy cover falling to the table with a soft thud. "You'd be wrong in thinking that."

I let out a tired albeit slightly amused scoff. "Alright then. First things first, ask the book if the Games could really be rigged?"

He just blinks at me for a moment. "You're seriously telling me you don't know what history says about that?"

I just shrug my shoulders, knowing exactly where I stand. "I know what *people* say about it, but no. No, I don't."

But Ricky seems genuinely puzzled. "We're still suffering the consequences of the Umbrage and you were never in the least interested to find out how it came to it?"

I throw him a smile but there's a bitter taste in my mouth as images flash through my mind, images of life around our Academy as I've always known it. Dying a slow, painful death.

And what am I supposed to do? Obsess over how it came to be, or try to fix it for everyone by getting a position at the Academy?

I lock eyes with my little friend and I tell him, “Sometimes, Ricky, the best thing a man can do about a thing like that is to refuse to give it power.”

“Past is there to be learned from,” he snaps.

“And *now* is here to be lived,” I insist, leaning a little forward and not letting him look away, “not poisoned by what can never be changed.”

For a second, he just looks at me. Then he gives me a funny little smile and says, “Alright then.”

He turns his attention to the book and starts quickly leafing through it.

“So here,” he says when he stops and pokes his finger right where it says *The End of the Games*, “you’ll find the *Grimm* Academy version of the events.”

I squint to where he’s pointing, but he just looks up and gives me a summary. “The Games of 1867, the last Games to ever happen until now, never got to be finished. Our two Academies started off on equal footing, somewhere around the Winter Solstice Ball the Fiáin Academy started winning and then, just as they were about to start the last Game, the Grimm Academy’s Pied Piper called it off, accusing the Fiáin Academy’s Archon for rigging everything in his team’s favor.”

My eyes narrow. “So it really is possible?” I ask.

“This is the *Grimm* Academy version, as I’ve already said. Right here,” he says as he points to another section of the text, “we have the information on the Box. There’s not a lot, as its secrets are being kept, well, secret. Basically, all we know for sure is that it was made by Dame Gothel and that she used duskenwood to create it.”

“Does that tell us anything useful?”

He shakes his head a little. “It’s an extremely rare material and it’s got powerful magic of its own. So far, no one’s managed to do any research on it without getting seriously injured or straight out dying.”

I just nod thoughtfully.

“On the other hand,” Ricky keeps going, matter-of-factly, “there’s no proof, *none*, that any kind of tampering has ever been tried on the Box. It was petty jealousy on part of Grimm Academy, as well as an excuse to attack ours and try to get ahold of its power.”

“They do seem power-thirsty, even now,” I say as my mind rushes back to the players I saw in the Ring today.

“That’s because they are.”

An image pops into my head, the image of the Shadowscape girl. I try to resist the urge — I don't want to give Ricky a reason to pry — but before I can do anything to stop it, I find myself using a deliberately flat voice to ask, "That prince you mentioned, the one who got engaged…"

Ricky gives me a couple of sharp nods. "Yeah. That's Maximillian Aalders the Second." His eyes lighting up, he whispers, "Look what kind of cool stuff they have here."

And he presses some button on the table and its surface starts moving, the wood seeming to come to life. I frown, fixing my eyes on it to see what's going to happen. First, little valleys and peaks start being formed, then roads and rivers get cut into them, along with their names. And before I know it, the table has turned into a relief map of Europe.

"That's fucking cool," I say as I look up at Ricky.

"I know, right." It's with a lit up face that he snaps out of it and goes on to explain, "Maximillian Aalders the Second, he's the prince of this territory right here." He points to a large valley encompassing the lake we're currently camping on, the Sobbing Lake. "The Academy's in *his* jurisdiction and the vampire King seems to be putting a lot of faith in him, despite the other princes having more territory."

And it's interesting and relevant, what he's telling me, but it's not the prince I want him to talk about right now. I make an effort to be as nonchalant about it as possible. "And the girl who played Shadowscape with him yesterday? Is that his fiance?"

"Yeah. Anastasya Konstantinova Romanova," he rushes to reply. "But I've read that those close to her call her Nyx."

It makes me blow a laugh through my nose. "You've *read* it?"

He nods. "Yes, she's a duchess from the famed three-century old Romanov dynasty," he says matter-of-factly.

It makes my eyebrows shoot up. "Fucking hell," I say as I run my hand through my hair. "A duchess, you say?" I ask as another image of her pops into my mind.

But my friend's eyes are already scanning the map before him, excitement once again clearly written on his face.

I watch his finger as it lands far north, circling a huge chunk of territory all in white, with the sea stretching along its seemingly deserted coast. "Now, that's all *hers*." He looks up at me and says, dropping his voice to a

whisper and giving me a conspiratorial smile, “People say the Prince is only marrying her for the land.”

“Really?” I ask. But I don’t wait for an answer. “So the two of them,” I start, “Aalders and Romanov, they're the ones to keep an eye on here.”

“Him, yes. Her, not so much.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Despite all that land? And isn’t she about to become Princess?”

Ricky lets out a little chuckle. “It’s not like where *we* come from. In the vampire territories, the King chooses his Princes wisely because they’re the ones keeping the realm together. But Princesses… I mean, they often have property of their own and they do technically have power, but they don’t actually exercise it.”

Now that makes my eyebrows shoot up, and not just because I myself come from a very different land. It’s got more to do with the look in those big, dark eyes, so intelligent and determined. “I don’t know if *that’s* true,” I find myself saying.

“What do you mean?”

“Nevermind,” I say with a wave of my hand. “So basically, they’re there to secure the line and look pretty.”

“I mean, it’s not all that bad, especially if you’re not a princess. Take de Groot for instance. She’s very powerful and she’s a woman. But she does take shit for it.”

I pause for a second, thinking. “Ricky?”

He nudges me to spit it out.

“You think I’m overreacting, right? You think I’m seeing a conspiracy where there isn’t one.”

He seems confused. “What made you think that?”

I let out a laugh. “All this talk of Grimm Academy lying about the Games of 1867, the Box being resistant to tampering et cetera.”

He shakes his head. “I’m just giving you facts. It’s got nothing to do with my opinions. In my opinion, we all know what happened that year and how many people ended up dead. I think you’re only being a good leader, taking everything into consideration instead of just ruling out the possibility of someone trying to hurt your pack.”

I nod thoughtfully.

But Ricky’s not done. “And that leads me to what we came here for,” he says as he flips over a couple of more pages in the book before him. “This

information about the last Games, I could've just told you that. But this…"

He stops to scan the page he's on. "Ah yes," he says when he finds what he's looking for. "When you found me after the Game, you mentioned the Guardian of the Obscura," he tells me, at the same time skimming over the text in front of him.

Frowning, I just wait for him to finish.

"Well," he says when he looks up, "the spell that binds the Guardian to the Box is a tricky one." And he points to the text. "It's of the dynamic type, the highly unstable one." He presses his lips tight, making my ears prick up in anticipation. "And it says right here that sometimes those spells can be altered over time."

"Like?" I ask.

"The possibilities are probably endless."

"Including the possibility that Ludwig Schwarz changed the way the Game treated players?"

"If anyone could do it, it would be him."

"You know they're talking about canceling the Games?" I ask him. "I don't know which would be worse. Them being canceled, or all of us continuing but having to worry about them being rigged."

For a second, there's only silence as we look at each other with concern in our eyes.

Then my fox smells one of our own. I crane my neck to see O'Malley Senior approaching us.

He leans to tell me in a respectfully low voice, "My brother is back at the camp."

Tension swells in me, making my eyebrows pull down as I nod to O'Malley Senior to lead me to him.

*

He's okay. Relieved, I'm so fucking relieved, I think as I pull my head down to walk out of O'Malley Junior's tent. I don't know how, but they've even managed to get his arms to grow back.

Once I'm outside, I stand straight and I slowly take in a lungful of the sweet autumn breeze. It's coming from the shimmering lake that's sprawling before me in all its late-afternoon glory, I can smell mouth-watering cooking all around me, I see some Grimm Academy students hanging out with our own…

And it seems no one will be losing any limbs today. To make it even better, judging by O'Malley Junior's words, there was no foul play between the teams whatsoever. His wolf smelled nothing different about the magic coming from the balls while it was all happening.

His theory? It was just part of the Game. And the Games *are* known to be brutal.

I let the joy wash over me, my mouth cracking into a grin as I say hi to all my pack members buzzing around the camp.

"Hey, Boss," Gleason calls out from his cozy chair by a campfire, "why don't you join us for dinner tonight?"

"Going for a little walk first."

It's been stressful and I really need some alone time, I think as I head over to the lakeshore. It's my solemn intention to forget about it all, at least for a second.

And the closer I get to the line of reefs bordering the clear, blue water, the more convinced I am I'll be able to get exactly what I want.

But when I reach them and look down into the water, it's not my own eyes I see. It's someone else's. A little vixen's.

And just like that, I find myself flooded with echoes of impressions — her creamy white skin, that sexy fucking voice, the way she moved…

And it's the first time this entire afternoon that my fox makes his presence known. *You know*, he starts in this strange voice, *if you went walking around the grounds right now, you'd probably bump into her*.

It feels like a cold shower, him shedding light on what I'm thinking about. "So what?" I demand.

I just want a whiff, that's all.

I roll my eyes. "You already got one."

Dahrian, he warns, making my ears prick up. He almost never addresses me using my actual name. It's mostly 'boy' he calls me.

"Yes?" I ask.

Don't play dumb with me.

"You're *not* getting to smell the girl again."

It's a complex scent, he urges. *Taking a single whiff is just not enough. Some things you need to savor a little*. He pauses for a second. *But that's where you come in*, he says in this conspiratorial tone. *You chat her up a little, you know, like you do, I get a few more whiffs and that's it*.

"Nope," I tell him.

He stays silent for a second. When he speaks again, his voice is vibrating with a low growl. *You're actually insisting on refusing me, boy?*

I don't let him get to me. I stay determined. "Yes, I am, and with good reason."

You need me.

"I do, yes," I say with a sigh. "But she's a fucking princess, she's *engaged*, and we have more important stuff to do than go around trying to fucking *smell* her."

There's a long moment of silence before he tells me through gritted teeth. *Then we'll just have to see how you fare at the Second Game*.

I let out a scoff, fighting an urge to throw my hands up. "Threatening me, *really*?"

But he doesn't say anything. He slinks back into the shadows, throwing his sulking in my face.

My blood suddenly boiling with frustration, I throw myself on a soft patch of grass between two reef bushes, so I can still watch the lake.

What the fuck is going on with my fox? I'm usually so in control of him.

There are things people generally misunderstand about shifters, alphas especially. Hell, even shifters tend to misunderstand them. Trying to become stronger, they focus on building muscle and making themselves as deadly as possible.

But that's not it, where a shifter's power resides. We're like two halves of the Moon, one light and one dark, just like our sigil. It makes us… powerful but unpredictable, I think as my eyes sweep over the calm surface of the deep lake before me.

That's why it's the control that matters. And perhaps counterintuitively, the more in control an alpha is, the fiercer he can be in his shifted form. Aggression alone gets you nowhere.

And usually, I ruminate as I pluck blades of grass from the moist ground below me, I'm *in* control. Besides Brogan and my mother, I've never met anyone more in control. Life has offered me quite a few valuable lessons and I've made sure to sear them all into my brain. And *that* is why I was chosen to be the alpha of my pack despite my age generally being considered too young, not because of my muscles.

That's more for the ladies, I think with a smile.

But that's exactly my concern. The ladies. I frown and I accidentally rip an entire clump of grass from the ground.

Sure, Shadowscape girl is a curious one.

But I've been with so many women in my life.

So why's he acting as if he's never smelled one?

Especially now that we have my family's future hanging in the balance. I don't want anyone else get unnecessarily hurt, but what happens if they really cancel the Games? If I don't get the Professorship, I won't be able to move them to the Academy. And then what, I think with a frown. Will they be forced to watch their land *die* right in front of their eyes? And where will they go once it does?

"Dahrian," I hear someone call out. "Hey, Dahrian." My head snaps back and I see Fiona rushing to where I'm sitting. I jump up and I turn around to face her.

She's a little breathless when she grins at me. "It's done," she says in an excited voice.

I nudge her to speak.

"They won't be canceling the Games." She flashes me a smile. They're unpausing them."

My mouth cracks into a grin. "Well, isn't that grand?" I say as I come clap her on the back.

And it is. It gives me the chance to fix everything. Right now, there are sixty four players left in the Games. Forty two of ours and twenty two of theirs.

I only have to make sure we keep winning like that.

Chapter 7 - Nyx

"Miss Romanov," Uncle's raspy voice calls out, making my eyes snap up from the book I'm reading.

He's standing in front of the pulpit in the classroom lit solely by the fading afternoon sun, the shadows making his frown appear even deeper. "It's the first class of the year and you're already not paying attention?"

Quickly, I close the book shut and pop it on the shelf under the table. "I apologize, Professor Schwarz," I say, suddenly aware of everyone's eyes on me. Sadly, Uncle's class, Blood Magic Level Three, is a popular one so there are a lot of them.

I press my lips tight and I take my pen in my hand to pretend to take notes in the open notebook before me.

"That's more like it," Uncle says and goes back to pacing the room, talking about the influence of the purity of a vampire's blood on the efficacy of Blood Magic.

I shrug the momentary embarrassment off and I smile, my eyes lingering on him for a second. It's something I've always liked about him. How he doesn't let our blood bond deter him from treating me like everyone else. And he's right. Yesterday, we had the Game, but today, the actual classwork is starting.

But my mind stays on Uncle. it makes me frown, wondering what he'd say if he knew why I wasn't paying attention. If he knew what book I had under the table and why. Would I be able to explain to him that it's nothing personal? That I just have to be careful, especially considering no one else in the family seems to be willing to put in the effort?

And I know this is neither the time nor the place for this, but I'm having such a busy day. Max will be picking me up almost right after class and we'll be forced to spend the evening with the Viscount and his sons in some blatant attempt at sucking up.

Which means I really have to do this now, I think as I very subtly slide my hand under the table and crack the book open again, resting it on my thighs.

The book has one of those long, dry titles, *The Romanov Dynasty from the 19th to the 20th century,* but it's anything but boring.

It tells the tale of our family from the time of Catherine the Great to Mother's time and it's full of stories of coups, incest, assassinations, mental illness and religious fanaticism.

But it's Uncle I'm focusing on right now. And there's nothing tying him to the Games or the Fiáin Academy in any meaningful way other than him being the Guardian of the Obscura. He seems to have devoted his life to teaching Blood Magic here, corresponding with professors from across the world. Not exactly the profile of someone preparing to destroy said Academy's attempts to renew old alliances.

I frown as soon as it occurs to me. Could it be the issue of 'real' Romanovs?

I look up from the book and straight at him, observing him as he keeps teaching his class.

I was told the story many, many times. The story of Katerina Romanova and her love marriage. It was the seventeenth century and families, *ours* in particular, were a lot more conservative than they are today. Her decision to marry for love angered the family so much, they ended up trying to kill her. They failed, but they did succeed in disinheriting her. It was only in the late 18th century that they took her family under their wing again.

The Schwarzes.

And over the centuries, they did end up getting recognized as part of the extended family. But you only need to see Hilde's face when the topic gets broached to realize how fickle that status is.

She’s never said anything, but I could always tell she’s not indifferent to not being a ‘real’ Romanov.

I frown as I watch Uncle walk up to the blackboard to write something in his elegant, but entirely illegible handwriting.

He’s never shown any signs of being butthurt about it all, but who knows what hides inside a person’s heart?

Maybe now that he’s getting older, it’s starting to bother him. Maybe he wants to write another page in our history books so that he may seal his legacy as a ‘real’ Romanov.

I frown. But why choose *this*? It seems so random and not all that significant, messing with the outcome of the Games. Besides, even if he *is* up to something and even if it works, it’s not like he’d be going around boasting about it.

Maybe it’s the old grudge after all?

I let out a frustrated sigh and keep reading about what happened during the Umbrage, focused on spotting anything to do with the Schwarzes.

But the book, like every single one I’ve ever read on the topic, practically only mentions the two Kings at the time — our Peter the Great and their Cathal O’Connor — going into tiresome detail on how they led their armies against each other after the clash at the Games.

And it was a brutal war that impacted most royal families of the time, but still, not a single mention of the Schwarzes.

Desperate, I even go online to get more information on the sources used in writing the book.

It’s then that I spot something unusual. But before I let myself get excited, I rush to check if my impression is correct.

It is.

There are tons of sources for all years leading up to the war and following it. Except for the years 1865 and 1866.

Odd, I think to myself. Very, very odd.

And I look up, frowning as I fix my eyes ahead, but it’s at that exact moment that the bell sounds from the hallway.

And just like that, there’s the usual chaos all around me, Uncle giving us our next week’s assignment while everyone rushes to get their bags ready so they can dart out as soon as they can.

I write the assignment down, I throw the book in my bag, sling it over my shoulder and start marching.

I only have half an hour before Max said he'd pick me up. And he's a busy man so he's generally at least an hour late, but once I'm dressed, that'll give me some more time to do my research.

I rush out of the classroom, down to the Elevator and up to my room in Lilith Tower. I don't waste any time choosing which of the twenty one fucking dresses I'll be putting on today. I just pick one at random and squeeze myself into it as quickly as I can.

And there's so many buttons, l end up cursing the damn thing out loud, but I do it.

And I rush down the stairs and into the Common Room, happy to see I'll have at least fifteen minutes to do some more reading.

But as soon as my boots hit the Common Room floor, I spot my brother seemingly waiting for someone.

And as soon as he smells me and turns around to face me, I realize that that person is me.

He throws me a huge, plaintive smile as he rushes to meet me, just like he always does when he has a 'little favor' to ask.

"What is it?" I ask with a frown.

"Just a little favor I need you to do for me."

"Spit it out."

"Meet up with my new shifter buddy and show him around a little."

For a second, I just look at him. Then I throw my hands up in the air and say, "Bloody hell, Nikolay. Why did you sign up for the damn thing if you don't want to do it?"

"I do," he insists. "It's a real honor to be picked."

I shake my head at him. "You can't volunteer to do something and then pressure someone else into doing it for you."

"I have a date, Nyx," he keeps trying to win me over with a sad voice. "And she's the most perfect girl you've ever seen."

I let out a scoff. I know exactly how things go with his 'most perfect girls.'

But it's puppy eyes he's fucking giving me. Puppy eyes.

"Ugh," I groan. And I roll my eyes and I shake my head, but then I nod. "But I'm only doing it this once. The rest of the year, it's just you and your Fiáin Academy buddy."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," he exclaims. And he literally bounces up and down with delight, making me blow a laugh through my nose.

“Okay, fucker, leave then,” I tell him with a smile.

“Will do,” he replies and starts rushing away, only craning his neck to throw, “His name is Howe and he’ll be waiting for you by the Brothers Grimm statue.”

Alright then, I think as he disappears out of the Common Room. If I’m efficient, I’ll probably be able to get this over with even before Max shows up.

*

As I leave the Common Room for the Entrance Hall — where the Brothers Grimm statue is — I walk by the tall, gilded mirror hanging on the wall just before the archway leading to the staircase.

And I normally don’t throw a single glance in its direction, but today is different. Because it just now occurs to me that this will be the first time I’m going somewhere with Max in the official fiance capacity.

So before I start making my way down the stairs, I pause in front of the mirror, just for a second. I don’t let myself linger on my reflection. It’s good enough, I think as I drag my eyes down my dress.

It’s good enough, I keep trying to convince myself as I tear myself away from the mirror and force myself to keep walking.

And step by step, I’m making my way down to the Elevator Door waiting on the ground floor of the tower. But the image of me as I saw myself in the mirror keeps haunting me.

Even the perfectly tailored burgundy dress with the detailing in Robin-egg blue can’t hide how little I resemble your usual princess. My body is hopelessly curveless and my face persistently tomboyish.

I reach the Elevator and I go in, pressing the button for the Entrance Hall. And I do manage to fight the urge to conjure up images to torture myself with, images of all the other Princesses, each more beautiful and feminine than the last.

But what I *don’t* manage to fight off is the image of Max, drunk at some party I can no longer remember properly, talking about one of them as if she were the embodiment of fucking perfection. Her and her huge tits. I asked him, once the party was over, if he liked them more than he liked mine. And he said of course not, but he hesitated a little.

So when the Elevator Door opens, I’m still self-conscious and a little grumpy.

I step out, the sound of my boots clicking against the polished stone floor getting drowned out by many others. I keep walking towards my destination, scanning the faces all around me as I go.

I slow to a stop as soon as I spot him.

That alpha standing among the buzzing students, leaned against the statue with one boot casually lifted to the lowest step. He's typing on his phone, the muscles in those big tattooed arms flexed in a way that evokes images of deadly weapons.

But there's a tag on his shirt that my eyes get drawn to. I zero in on it. Howe, it says Howe.

Of course that Nikolay would get the alpha assigned to him. Fuck, fuck, fuck, I curse as I suddenly become even more self-conscious, with the stupid dress and the stupid body and the stupid face.

For a second, I consider turning on my heel and walking away.

But then he looks up, as if he's sensed me watching, and he tears himself away from the statue, his head tilting as he slides his phone in his pocket and keeps standing there, looking at me.

I find myself moving toward him again. And this might not be pleasant for either of us, I think as I see his eyebrows pull down in what has to be irritation. After all, we haven't exactly started off on the right foot.

But what's done is done, I guess. And he's a guest here and I need to make him feel welcome, I think to myself as I keep approaching him. So I force myself to shake it off and smile, however tensely.

*

When I come to stand in front of him, I see his frown disappear, but it doesn't make me feel any less nervous because he's still observing me too intently, his head tilted in a silent question.

Without ever consciously making the decision, I choose to ignore our first interaction ever even happened. "Hi," I say, "I've been sent to show you around." And I hold my hand out for a shake. "I'm Anastasya, nice to meet you."

Why did I do that? I *hate* that name.

For a second, I think he's going to say, "Yeah, we've already met."

And his eyes narrow, but then a smile tugs at his lips and he takes my hand, saying, "Dahrian Howe. The pleasure's all mine."

I breathe a sigh of relief. And it's firm and gentle at the same time, his shake. Still smiling, he keeps looking at me as I pull my hand out. Then his

eyes dart to the ring.

He clears his throat, turning serious. There's a second of silence before he says, "I was told there'd be a Nikolay coming to meet me."

"My brother," I reply with a nod. "He's busy so he sent me." Then it occurs to me. "And sorry if I'm late, this was a last-minute change of plans." I glance around the crowded Hall, shrugging my shoulders as I turn my eyes back onto him. "Also, my fiance will be picking me up soon, so I might not have as much time as I normally would."

"Ah yeah," he says with a tip of his head, "I've heard about the royal engagement. Congratulations," he adds, giving me a smile. Then he looks around as well, turning serious again. "But I don't want to be an inconvenience. I can just go chill somewhere and get to know the place at my own pace."

"No," I tell him, shaking my head, "someone has to show you around."

"I won't tell if *you* don't," he says with a slight smile.

I just look at him for a second. "It's the rules."

His eyes narrow. "Ah," he says softly. "Well, if that's the case..." Smiling, he gestures for me to lead the way.

And for some reason, they make me self-conscious, the look and the smile, as if there was something unspoken there.

But I just nod, saying, "Yeah, let's get started." And I turn on my heel and start walking across the Entrance Hall and in the direction of Level One, avoiding the students passing by and sensing him fall into step with me.

It's only once we've almost passed the archway that it occurs to me he might not even know the basics. And I slow down to motion at it. "So, that right there is the cafeteria," I tell him.

I move to pick up the pace again, motioning ahead, "And right over there __"

It surprises me, when he walks around me, blocking my way with his large frame. "Wait," he starts with a smile, "aren't we taking a look inside?"

I frown. "What for? It's a standard cafeteria."

He throws me a funny little look, his eyebrows shooting up. "Really?" he asks as this smile dances on his lips. He motions at the fountains. "And what're *those*?"

It makes me press my lips tight. "Soda fountains," I admit, however begrudgingly. "They're soda fountains."

He blows a laugh through his nose. And it makes my cheeks burn, having my privilege checked like that.

But then he just says, “It’s fine, we don’t have to go in.” He gives me a smile, “I’m putting myself in your hands.”

For a second, I just look at him. “Perfect,” I finally say, feeling myself turn a bit colder.

And I continue moving across the Entrance Hall, him coming to walk beside me again. Feeling this need to cut the tour as short as possible, I start calculating the most effective route to get it done.

“So,” I say as soon as we reach the stairs to the gallery and start climbing them, “we have four levels here at the Academy. Right now, we’re climbing to Level One.”

It’s at that exact moment that my vampiric hearing registers something. I stop and I don’t turn to look at him, but I hold my right hand out to so he’ll stop as well, saying, “Watch out.”

He does, and the next thing I know, I see this mini water torrent coming straight at us from Level One.

We both rush to glue ourselves to the left side of the staircase railing as this fae guy barges out of one of the hallways above, rushing down as he uses his Runes to turn the water into vapor, shouting, “Sorry sorry sorry.”

There are snickers all around us, and I’m lifting my dress, the hem of which has been soaked through, but then my eyes get drawn to my right, where Howe is standing on a lower step, his eyes on the soaked hem.

He looks up, that smile dancing on his lips again, the one that makes me feel as if he’s holding something back.

I tear my eyes away, going back to climbing.

“What year are you in?” I hear him ask as he catches up with me.

It makes me frown. “Third.”

But we’re stepping onto the gallery and I don’t want to be engaging in any unnecessary chit-chat, so I change the subject, motioning at the web of hallways to the right. “I don’t know which classes in particular you’re taking this year, but most of them will be held somewhere in these hallways.”

“Are you taking Theory of Magic?” he asks. “I’m in Level Three this year.”

“Level Four,” I say as I keep leading us down the gallery.

I feel the need to glance at him, finding his eyebrows raised at me.

“They let me advance so I could take some extra courses my final year,” I explain, but then I turn my focus back onto the task at hand. I motion to my right. “Now, your professors’ offices are mostly located in Grimm Tower…”

I stop to peer into one of the hallways, a little helplessly. “But right here, *somewhere*, you’ll find Professor Dunne.”

I turn my eyes back onto him, explaining, “He likes to move around.”

But I find him inspecting one of the empty suits of armor displayed along the walls.

“What’s this?” he asks as he throws me a glance, pointing at the crest. “It says Romanov. Is this your family’s?”

“It is,” I say, and I move to keep walking.

I stop as soon as I realize he’s not following.

I frown as I turn to look at him, finding him inspecting the painting next to the suit. “This, too?”

I have to fight not to let out a sigh. “Look,” I say as I walk back up to him, trying not to sound annoyed, “I’m glad to see you’re finding the Academy interesting, but if we stop to take a look at every little thing, we’ll never be done.”

His eyebrows shoot up. Then his lips curl into a smirk. “Alright, I’ll behave.” And he pauses for a second before he drags his eyes down my dress. “Your Highness.”

It makes me want to gouge his eyes out. Instead, I ignore his little stab, I take a deep breath, I say, “Good,” and I keep going down the gallery, headed straight for the elevator that’ll lead us to Level Minus Three.

I sense him try to catch up with me, but my mind is still buzzing from the way he just blatantly mocked the way I look in this fucking outfit, so I pick up the pace so we’re not walking side by side.

I listen to him fall into step somewhere behind me, a little to the right. As we walk, I try to focus on taking the most efficient route. But every couple of fucking seconds, I see some girl eyeing him, a lot of them either shyly or openly seductively saying hi to him. I roll my eyes and I keep walking, choosing to ignore everything but the task at hand.

Then, after a couple of long moments of silence, I start to hear this soft, playful sound from behind my back.

Whistling.

Frowning, I slow down a little, my head snapping back to him.

He keeps walking, but he stops whistling, his eyebrows shooting up and his lips curling into a smile as he mouths, “What?”

“Nothing,” I snap and I turn my eyes back ahead.

But now my ears are burning.

It’s just as we’re almost in front of the elevator that I sense him get closer, his arm brushing mine for a split second when he leans to ask, “Where’re we going, if you don’t mind me asking?

I only throw him a side-eye glance. “A former classroom on Level Minus Three.”

He darts around me to block my way again, making me stop midstep. He has his hands in his pockets, his head tilted at me. “Why there?”

It makes me frown, his question, as well as the fact I notice how broad his shoulders are. “What we need to do next,” I tell him in my most official voice, “is cover all the Restricted Areas. Then I’m going to show you around the administrative offices, so you know where to go in case of any problems—”

“How ‘bout this?” he asks with an amused smile. “If I ever find myself in *administrative* trouble, I’ll just ask someone to point me in the right direction. Would *that* work?”

I feel a need to protest, but this kind of thing is something every student around here *would* know about. “I guess.”

And just as I’m about to open my mouth to say that that doesn’t solve the issue of Restricted Areas, he says, “As for Restricted Areas, there are currently three of them, right?

Squinting, I open my mouth to answer him, but his question turns out to be a rhetorical one.

“The Level Minus Three classroom,” he starts listing, “which is being purged of Malefica plant, the basement in Ydril Tower that’s still under investigation, and the Sobbing Lake itself — at least past the shallow, right?”

“How do you know all that?” I ask.

He just looks at me for a second, then lets out a little scoff. “Our Academy has bad blood with yours, not a single member of my pack has ever been here, and we’ve committed to spending an entire year with you. You didn’t think I’d do my research?” He pauses for a second, his eyebrows raising at me. “You do know that I’m the Fiain *alpha*?

And he flashes me this hot, a little *incredulous* but hot smile.

For a moment, I just keep staring back at him, feeling myself starting to blush.

"I do, and point taken," I say, fighting to keep my voice flat. "But then, I guess you don't really need me."

And I prepare to start saying bye, feeling a little relieved at the thought of this being over.

But he just clicks his tongue, shaking his head. "Oh I wouldn't go that far. There's still plenty for you to show me."

"Like what?"

He glances around then turns to lock eyes with me again, the smile back on his face. It's just that this time, it's a daring one. "Anything fun."

The way he says it, it just makes my heart flutter a little.

I guess it can't hurt, I think to myself.

"Alright," I reply with a straight face. "Follow me."

I don't wait for his reaction. I turn on my heel and I start leading him to the hallways on the other side of the Entrance Hall, where some of the more interesting gyms are located. But now, it's even harder to pay no attention to the steady, confident sound of his boots hitting the floor, or that skilled, soft whistling behind my back.

Gods, I think as I walk into the first hallway, still feeling that flutter in my chest, he's *seriously* charming. Like, in a way that's really hard to ignore.

Player, I remind myself, he's a player and he's good because this is the kind of effect he has on people. It's as simple as that.

I just didn't think he'd have it on *me*.

I clear my throat, making myself snap out of it just as we turn the corner and enter the hallway I'm bringing him to. There are sounds of muffled footfalls, blows and cursing echoing against the walls. I turn to face Howe and I gesture for him to take a peek through the first archway.

He walks up to it and looks inside. And he almost instantly turns to beam at me. "Fucking hell."

I roll my eyes, but there's a smile tugging at the corner of my lips. He walks through the archway and I follow him, the fading sunlight hitting my face as soon as I step into the room. It's wide, that's for sure, but the width is a fifth of its length. And all along its left and right walls, there are tall windows enchanted to show the sky outside, the walls between them hidden from sight by the trees spurting out of the ground.

I turn my eyes back onto Howe, who's already on his way to the first obstacle in the obstacle course stretching before us — the enchanted climbing wall.

I rush after him, but before I can stop him, he's already grabbing onto one of the climbing holds and pushing himself up.

I step to the side, opening my mouth to warn him, but before I can say a word, the wall shoots out the first stake. Then another one. And another one. And it's at random, but it only takes one to hit you.

My eyebrows shooting up, I watch him waste no time in adjusting, seemingly sensing which spot the next stake will shoot out of and letting himself hang using one arm every time the wall attacks again.

Somewhere halfway up the wall, he even takes the time to throw me a grin as he hangs, his shirt riding up to reveal the defined, delicious lines of his abs.

I let out an annoyed scoff, but then something occurs to me. And I have to suppress a smile, but I walk straight up to the wall to my right and I pull on the lever controlling the difficulty level.

And I turn back to His Hotness, seeing his eyebrows shoot up right before he lets himself drop to the ground, a bunch of stakes shooting out at once as soon as his boots hit the floor.

Fuck, maybe I went overboard. Maybe he won't find it funny.

He pushes himself up, pulls his shirt down and starts walking up to me, but to my surprise, he's not pissed. He's grinning.

"Hey," he starts in a teasing voice as he slows to a stop in front of me, his eyes narrowing, "I see how it is."

"It's just what you get for showing off," I tell him, feeling this flutter and fighting the urge to smile.

Chapter 8 - Dahrian

There's a flutter in my stomach when I see that little smile tug at her lips.

"Why don't *you* try it?" I dare her. "Or better yet, why don't we *both* do the entire obstacle course? See who's better."

Her eyes narrowing, she folds her arms. "It would only discourage you," she says in a snarky voice, "me wiping the floor with you for the second time in two days."

It makes my smile wider.

Give her a little shove on the shoulder, my fox urges.

I ignore him. Instead, I get a little closer, leaning in to say in a low, teasing voice, "Why don't you put your money where your mouth is?"

For a second, she just looks at me. Then, like the flip of a switch, she turns cold. "That's not what we're here for," she snaps, like a prickly little ball of fire. "Come on, I'll show you the Main Hall and then you're free to go."

She turns around and starts walking out of the gym.

I move to follow her, needing more of what I just got. Struggling to keep my distance as we go back the same way we got here, I allow myself to throw a little glance at her here and there. Giving some student a barely noticeable nod in greeting, swaying left to evade a professor appearing out of thin air, throwing a look over her shoulder to check whether I'm still

here. Or just show she's not forgotten about me as we go back down yet another staircase in silence.

Who manages to look just as good in a plain uniform and a ridiculously elaborate dress like that?

Call her Your Highness again, that seems to get her worked up.

"Will you shut the fuck up," I warn him.

I really can't have him make a fool out of me right now. So I raise the barrier between us a little higher.

But if I just keep letting her lead, she'll show me the Main Hall and that'll be it.

Then it occurs to me, and I find myself falling into step with her. And I notice her tense up so I back away a little before I say, "You know, I've heard about this room in the Academy that's not restricted, but has some forbidden magic cast on it."

She doesn't stop marching. She just throws me a look. It's in a cordial but stern voice that she says, "There are a million places like that. And I'm not taking you to any of them."

And she keeps marching. But I can't seem to stop myself from poking at her, trying to get another reaction out of the little vixen in the elaborate dress marching in front of me. So I get a little closer to say, "Sorry, forgot I was talking to a princess."

She stops and turns to face me, frowning. "I'm not a princess *yet*."

I drag my eyes down her dress, no longer suppressing the snicker as I say, "I only know what I see."

My eyebrows shoot up when she gets in my face. "You know, this is not how I normally dress," she tells me in a voice much less flat than a second ago. "I have a formal dinner and this is just the kind of thing you wear to a formal dinner."

Wow. Sure touched a nerve *there*. But looking at the flush on her cheeks… 'Twas worth it, I think with a smile.

I rush to follow her as soon as she starts walking again. "So a formal dinner, you say?" I ask, finding myself in desperate need of more information. "What do you do at one of those? Is it as fun as it sounds?" I ask sarcastically.

She turns to shoot me an annoyed glance. "Not *everything* is about fun."

"Are you always this prickly?" I ask as I follow her down the last flight of stairs and back into the Entrance Hall.

“Only when I’m being asked stupid questions. Otherwise, I’m a ray of fucking sunshine.”

And she throws me a look that makes my blood rush around a little, my fox poking his nose through my barriers.

And just as he’s about to get a whiff of her, she turns left and I follow her through an archway into a massive common room.

“There,” she says, in a flat yet a little pissed-off voice, as my eyes sweep across the huge yet somehow cozy space, “the Main Hall.”

Slowly, I spin around to take it all in, the old stone walls covered in ancient tapestries, the tall stained glass windows, the comfy, colorful armchairs and couches all around me.

“It’s where we come to waste time between classes,” I hear her say, less pissed-off this time. “There’s always people here ready to play a game and sometimes we throw parties, mostly on Fridays.”

I turn my eyes back to her just as this soft ping sounds from her clutch. She opens it to look inside, the screen of her phone glowing as she checks her messages.

I probably won’t see her again, except at the Games.

“You know,” I start as soon as she looks up at me again, not giving her a chance to say she has to leave, “I’ll forgive you for calling my questions stupid…” I pause, watching a little frown start creasing her forehead. I motion in the direction of the gym. “But you also didn’t want to give me the rematch that you owe me. And *that* I do take offense to.”

Her frown grows deeper as she shakes her head. “The rematch that I owe you? What’re you even talking about?”

I take a step closer, my lips curling into a smile. And I drop my voice a little. “Well, it was a great performance, the one you put on for me yesterday.” I pause for effect. “But you did manipulate me, so you couldn’t call it fair, the way you played.”

“Well, who fucking started it?” she says with an angry scoff.

I just shrug my shoulders, my smile growing wider at the sight of her big, dark eyes narrowing at me. “I never said I didn’t. I just said we needed a rematch.”

“Show up for the Second Game,” she snaps, albeit a bit less grumpily, “and you’ll get one.”

“That’s, like, *months* from now,” I protest.

It's just at that moment that I hear someone clear their throat and my head snaps to my left, to the man standing next to one of the armchairs, his eyes narrowed as they dart between the two of us.

The prince. The *fiance*.

"Max," I hear her call out, softly and sweetly, and he fixes his eyes on her as she walks over to him with a smile lighting up her face.

The voice and the smile, the likes of which I haven't heard or seen so far, make this bitterness flood my mouth.

"I'm not late, am I?" she asks as she loops her arm through his.

But it's me he turns to look at as he says, coldly, "It's fine."

It's then that she clears her throat and gestures at me. "Max, this is Howe, Nikolay's Fiain buddy."

We shake hands, locking eyes and exchanging one cold look as she says, "Howe, this is Max, one of our best players."

"And your fiance," he cuts in, throwing her this look.

I see the confusion on her face and I feel myself nudged to say, "Yeah, I know."

The fiance locks eyes with me and just looks at me for a second, and it makes my jaw clench, the effort I have to put in to stop myself from showing exactly how much I don't like him.

"Well," I hear her say and I turn to look at her, seeing her get all awkward and a little pissed as she throws a glance at him, "I guess we'll be going."

She turns her eyes back onto me as I keep standing there, my mind buzzing.

"My brother," she starts, still awkward though neither pissed nor cold, "he'll be there to take you to every Game, and if you have any questions for him, just shoot him a text."

I nod and I wave, feeling the fiance's eyes on me, and there's a tentative smile on her lips as she adds, "Good luck with everything."

I watch them turn around and walk away. With every step she takes, my spirits get lower. And I can't help thinking, especially considering that enormous rock on her finger, how the hell did I manage to forget about the fucking fiance?

Chapter 9 - Nyx

It seems this will be a typical November day, at least judging by the view out the windows enchanted to show the castle grounds — a blend of muted grays and greens, bare branches and wind tugging at everything it can lay its ghostly fingers on.

But it's going to be a good one, I think as I turn my focus back onto the comforting sounds, smells and sights of the cafeteria — metal against ceramic, garlic on bread, students buzzing around with trays in their hands.

Right now, I've no intention of joining Nikolay and Hilde's conversation. Still, their low but lively chatter provides such a pleasant background and allows me to observe the people around me in peace. I watch two groups, one Grimm and one Fiain, push two tables together so they can hang out while eating.

It makes me smile. It's been almost a month since the First Game and the Academy is buzzing with people who've already put the unpleasantness behind them. At least judging by the way they're mingling, I think as I fix my eyes on one of the Fiains leaning to say something to one of the Grimms. She throws her head back in laughter.

Oh I wish the Second Game was *now,* I think to myself, excitement flooding my body at the very thought. Right now, at least judging by the bets, people are rooting for either Max or Howe. But I'll be changing their minds if it's the last thing I do.

As I think that, my eye gets drawn to one of the Fiains, a tall, muscled guy, getting up to go grab something. And for a second, I think it's Howe. And my heart skips a beat and then keeps violently pounding in my chest, leaving me confused by the intensity of the reaction.

In the past two months, I've learned it's *his* fox all the Fiains have tattooed. I've been hearing girls talk about him in hushed voices. I've even seen his name on a bathroom wall. *Dahrian Howe is the best lay ever*, said the writing with hearts dotting the Is.

But I've only seen him a couple of times, from a distance. He doesn't seem to have any classes with me and we haven't exchanged a single word since I showed him around the Academy.

So why do I keep fearing I'll bump into him?

I shake my head and force myself to shift my attention back onto brother and Hilde. The two of them seem to be talking about the next challenge.

"I think there will have to be monsters in the next one," Nikolay says with conviction on his face and grease around his mouth. "Like that giant sea snake they found on Lord Hartmann's estate." And he takes another bite of his chicken leg.

Hilde glances between the two of us, unease written all over her face. "I don't know about that." Must be terrified at the very thought, considering she's not being as eager to agree as usual. "It's hard to get a license to use a creature like that nowadays. What do *you* think, Nyx?" she asks with a plea in her eyes.

"*I* think," I say as I push my plate away and start getting up, "my guess won't get you any closer to the right answer whatsoever. But I really need to get going."

"Where are you running off to?" Nikolay asks with a frown. "I thought we'd play Shufflesnake."

"I'm helping Max train and then I have some work to do."

"Isn't this your first day off in like forever?" he insists.

I roll my eyes and then throw him a sour smile. "Not having classes or formal dinners to attend doesn't mean I can just spend the rest of the day getting stoned and playing video games."

"Fuck," he says in a mocking voice, "you're so funny, sis. Please, would you do another bit for us?"

I just shake my head, wave to Hilde and walk out of the cafeteria.

It *is* my day off, I think as I start making my way to Max's quarters in Lilith Tower. It's part of the reason I'm excited, having an entire afternoon for myself. As soon as I'm done training with Max, I'll go back to the Library and pick up where I left off with my research.

Tingles rush up my spine as I think about the last thing I realized, that day in Uncle's class.

Hell yes, I think as I walk down the Entrance Hall. Today, I'll be checking if it's really true. That our family didn't have a leader for two whole years after the Umbrage.

Fucking can't wait.

But just as I come to a stop in front of the Elevator, my phone pings.

A text from Nikolay. "Forgot what day it is today. Would you mind going to the party without me?"

I frown. "What party?"

As soon as I start reading the reply, my blood pressure goes through the roof. "Howe's having a party at their camp tonight. I told him we'd come."

For a second, I have trouble articulating everything that's wrong with this. But then I start furiously typing a reply. "You can't sign me up for something without asking me first, Nikolay. Besides, this buddy thing is your responsibility, not mine."

"Fine, then we won't go," he types back. "Some of the guys from Lefevre are coming to Bloodholm tonight. I need to be there."

That makes me blow out a frustrated breath. "No, you need to be at that party because there needs to be at least one Romanov there. We were asked by the fucking Pied Piper herself to help keep the peace, Nikolay."

"I'm aware, thanks, but why can't it be you, Nyx?" he types. "You know where their camp is and you know how I feel about the lake, don't you?"

"The mermaids have signed a binding contract. There won't be a single peep from them."

"I'm already stoned. I'll only embarrass us."

Now, what I really want to reply is, "And that thought never crossed your mind *before* you got stoned?" But I don't. I just say, "No, I'm not going and that's that."

Why am I this adamant, I think to myself. But I just shrug it off.

It'll be fine. I'll ask Max to go, I think to myself. Max is worth at least two Romanovs.

My brother doesn't reply. Sulking, he's fucking sulking. For one long moment, I just stare at our chat. Then I force myself to look up, letting out a frustrated breath.

The Elevator door opens and it snaps me out of it, when I see a couple of students walk out.

I step inside and I push the button for Max's quarters, the one he got specially made.

My teeth are gritting even after the door opens and I see Max standing in his hallway, waiting for me in his training clothes, a smile on his lips.

At least this will be fun, I tell myself as I let out a pent-up breath.

*

"Ten minutes early this time," he says as I step out of the hallway. "Good girl," he adds as I give him a peck on the cheek.

It makes my eyebrows pull down.

Ever since I was late meeting him for that dinner — when I had to show Howe around — he's been prickly about this.

"I'm always as punctual as I can be," I reply with tension in my voice. And I push past him and through the door into his modern-looking gym.

I hear him let out an amused laugh as he follows me. "Who got you so worked up, cupcake?"

"Brother darling, who else," I tell him as I stand at the very center of the mostly empty but expertly furnished room. Rubber flooring, perfect lighting, all the tools and equipment you could ever need.

Smiling, Max shakes his head, throws me my vest and walks up to the weapons rack leaned against the wall to my right. "What did he do now?" he asks as he picks up the usual, a light but deadly javelin.

"Oh," I grumble as I absent-mindedly fiddle with the vest, "just shift all his duties onto me, including the buddy thing." I pause for a second before I look up to ask, "Max, are you going to the Fiain's party tonight?"

He squints at me. "No."

"Could you? We really need someone from the old families there and Nikolay's being the usual irresponsible ass."

He shakes his head. "I can't." There's that finality in his tone making it clear I shouldn't ask again. "I thought the two of you would be there, and I have something more important to deal with." He walks up to me with an even funnier little squint. "What, you don't want to go?"

“I don’t,” I say with determination in my voice. “I also have something more important to deal with.”

He gives me a smile. “That makes me happy.”

And the words confuse me, but then he shakes his head again, thinking. “Still, someone needs to be there.” And he locks eyes with me again. “You should go. In and out, you know?”

I think for a second, frowning. He does have a point, so why does it still *feel* like I shouldn’t?

“But take Hilde with you,” Max adds with that frown on his face, making me snap out of it. “I don’t want you alone there.”

And what I want to say is, “I don’t need a fucking chaperone.”

But that frown, it means his mind is made up. If I protested, we’d probably just end up going in circles over it for gods know how long.

So I just say, “You’re right, Hilde and I will go.”

He nods, throwing me a smile, and I proceed to finally put my vest on. And once I get my head through, I see Max standing in his own spot on the other side of the gym.

And the next thing I know, his eyes are narrowing, making my ears prick up and my muscles clench.

He’s pulling his arm back and he’s launching the javelin straight at me.

I do a back-flip, narrowly avoiding the weapon as it whizzes right above my stomach.

As soon as I land on my feet, he throws another one, rows and rows of them waiting on the weapons rack.

I keep avoiding them, one by one. And as usual, I need to actually work for it, serving as the moving target for one of the top javelin masters in our lands. So I find myself panting heavily within less than thirty minutes.

He suggests a break. I welcome it. I take the bottle of water he throws me and I down it thirstily, my mind instantly wandering to the party I’m being forced to attend.

The very thought gives me nervous flutters. Why am I nervous?

“Can’t we get a move on, cupcake?” Max calls out, javelin in his hand again.

I shake my head. “Yes, of course.”

And I get into the stance and he throws the weapon at me. I dodge. Then I dodge once again.

But as soon as it occurs to me, that I'll have to go greet the host, I lose sight of the weapon as I run and it ends up hitting me straight in the chest.

The vest just blocks it and the javelin comes falling to the floor with a clear thud, but the impact still sends me crashing to the ground.

"Gotcha," I hear Max yell out.

I look up from the floor to see the victorious grin on his face.

But when I get up, he's approaching me with a slight frown on his face. "I said 'gotcha'. Why are you so distracted?" he asks as he comes to stand in front of me.

For a second, I just look at him. And I don't want to lie, so my mind goes straight to my former plans for the afternoon. "This research I'm doing," I finally blurt out.

"What research?" He tilts his head as he wraps his arms around my waist and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

I smile and give one back, putting my arms around his neck. "I'm looking into my family's ties to the Games."

He frowns, pulling his head back a little. "What for?"

"Well," I start, thinking, "at first, I did it for precaution. After what happened at the First Game, I just thought it'd be smart. But now, now it's more about curiosity."

"That's nice," he says, the look on his face growing softer as he leans in for a kiss.

I return it, but my mind is still on the party I'll be going to later.

"Now," he mutters, his breathing turning ragged as he closes his hands around my ass, "let's get you out of those tights."

I shake my head, not feeling in the mood for sex.

"Come on, cupcake," he pleads. "How long has it been?"

A week at least, I think to myself.

And he starts pulling my tights down, along with my panties, so I kiss him back and I let him walk me backwards and against the mirrored wall.

His pants down, he lifts me up and keeps kissing me, and I start getting into it, but what takes me by surprise is this sudden desperation for *this* to be the time I finally get there with him.

And once he gets inside me, it feels so good, but as he grunts into my ear, I know I won't get the release. I never do. But his thrusts get more intense, making me crave it even more. My mind a blur, I start sliding my hand down my body, like I do when I'm alone.

The very next second, the usual anxiousness floods me, anxiousness at the very thought of him getting upset over it, like he did that once, ages ago.

So instead of indulging my urge, I search for his mouth to kiss him, telling myself we're in no rush. After all, we'll have the rest of our lives to figure this out.

*

It's with my lips pressed tight that I walk with my cousin down to the Sobbing Lake. It's just past seven o'clock and the sunlight is slowly fading, leaving growing shadows behind.

Hilde tries to start a conversation, but all I give her are one-word answers. There's a knot in my throat and I don't want to talk to *anyone* right now, let alone her. I keep imagining coming to greet him and my tongue getting so tied, I end up not saying anything.

We pass the courtyard and catch the first glimpse of the Sobbing Lake, the very sight making my heart plummet into my stomach.

Oh, fucking stop being so nervous, I tell myself as I force one foot in front of the other. He's invited everyone at the Academy. You'll say hi, you'll slink into the shadows and you'll disappear the first chance you get.

"Look," Hilde calls, slowing to a stop a few steps before me.

I welcome the distraction, when I follow her finger and see what they've done with the place.

The Sobbing Lake is usually a mournful part of the grounds, seldom visited despite House of Ydril nestling on its shore. When they go out for a breath of fresh air, the faes completely ignore it, just like the rest of us. The mermaids that live in it don't always sing their song, but you don't want to find yourself within earshot when they do.

So any other year, the lake would be silent and deserted, with just the wind rustling in the reefs and the mist hanging low above the grass, the plateau and the docks that the Academy built for this specific purpose, back in 1847.

But now, now there's so much life around it, I think as my eyes sweep over the camp. It was the day our guests arrived that the staff got the plateau set up for them. I went to see it, with the rest of the students, and it sure didn't look bad, especially with the roomy tents placed in circles around the fire pits. But it wasn't as welcoming as it feels now, with the students buzzing in and out of the tents and hanging out around the fire pits,

cooking, drinking and laughing as the sounds of the crickets mix with the soft sounds of music.

"Let's go," Hilde says in an excited whisper as she jabs me in the waist with her elbow and keeps walking.

I force myself to focus and I go after her.

Even before we reach the plateau, students from the camp start whizzing past us, yelling out incomprehensible stuff, playing games I don't know the rules for.

We keep going, Hilde leading us to where the crowd is loudest and thickest, up the rickety stairs and down the plateau to the biggest fire pit.

It's there that we stop, my eyes scanning the students' merry, firelit faces. It looks like they're all waiting for something, but I don't know what.

The very next second, I hear some of the people opposite me, on the other side of the empty circle around the fire, start to chant, someone letting out a low wolf whistle. And then I see them shuffle, letting someone through.

Howe. I watch him step out of the crowd and onto the empty circle around the fire with a mischievous smile on his face, two members of his pack trailing him with trays of glasses in their hands.

My stomach drops as he starts going around, handing the alcohol out to students who seem thrilled to receive it.

"Oh I like what's going on here," I hear Hilde say from my right, but I keep looking at Howe, my heart pounding in my chest.

"No no," I hear his voice boom, playful but commanding, when one of the Fiáins moves to throw the alcohol back, "not just yet."

The guy immediately lowers his glass, obediently but happily so.

"I really hope it's not whiskey," Hilde says, but I just let out a soft, "Um-hum," because he's served everyone to our left and is now headed straight towards us.

Look away, I tell myself, but I can't tear my eyes away from his face, that grin lighting up his eyes.

So when they finally land on *me*, as he stops right in front of us, he finds me staring.

Goddamn it, Nyx, get it together.

"Who do we have here?" he drawls as he throws me a little squint. He hands me a glass and says, "Where's my buddy?"

"Something came up, but he sends his apologies," I reply flatly, painfully aware of the fact I still haven't looked away.

“I’ll start to think he doesn’t exist,” he says with a smile that makes my blood run hotter. “But I’m glad you could come.”

And he turns his attention to Hilde, gives her a glass, gets her giggling with his stupid “I just know you’re going to love this,” and keeps going.

“Where the hell is Ricky?” I hear him ask one of his own.

“Don’t know, Boss.”

Boss? Ugh.

I turn to Hilde, squeezing the glass in my hand and gritting my teeth. What the fuck did he mean by that? *I’ll start to think he doesn’t exist*. He’s making it sound as if I’m stalking his arrogant ass.

But I guess when you’re His Hotness, you expect *everyone* to constantly be in fucking awe of you.

“It smells good,” I hear Hilde say, but I’m not really listening.

“Welcome, everyone,” his voice snaps me out of it.

I watch him come to stand near the fire with his own glass in his hand, his eyes sweeping over the crowd. “And a special welcome to all the Grimms we’ve managed to drag out here tonight, despite everything.”

There are sounds of laughing and clapping coming from all around me.

“Now, before we start enjoying ourselves, there’s something I’d like to say. I won’t be long, don’t worry. But the drink you’re about to have…”

He looks around, making sure he has everyone’s attention. He does.

“It’s from one of the last batches my mother ever made,” he finally says, making a low murmur rise from all around the circle and my eyebrows pull down. “Why am I bringing it out tonight?”

I’m still annoyed, but my ears still prick up.

Howe smiles and starts pacing around the fire. “In less than three months, on the day of the Winter Solstice, we’ll have our Second Game. It’ll also be the twelfth anniversary of my mother’s death.”

A pang of sympathy shoots through me and I start watching him even more intently.

“Now, her being one of the most powerful matriarchs in the history of our pack, most of you here have known this story since you were kids. But none of you Grimms do.”

True.

“So twelve years ago,” he keeps going, turning a bit more serious, “back where we come from, things were bad, really really bad. I mean, not as bad as they are *now*, but worse than they’d ever been before. You probably all

know what the Umbrage did to our Academy so I won't bore you with details. Suffice to say, its Heart never stopped deteriorating and it was making magic in our land scarce, unpredictable and vengeful. But now, now it was starting to make *people* turn on each other as well."

Holy shit, I never knew it was that bad.

"Now, my mother wasn't a softie," he says with a laugh. "She's still the toughest, *strongest* woman I've ever known. In the Council Room, she was able to wipe the floor with any man or woman who dared challenge her. On the battle ground, she was able to single-handedly change the course of the events."

My eyes dart left right, seeing he's still keeping everyone on their toes. "But these spats and pointless murders… For a while, she just didn't know what to do about them."

He pauses for a second, lifting a finger. "Until one day, twelve years ago, she used *her* mother's tricks and made a dozen barrels of this. And she ordered all the towns and villages under the Academy's wing to host at least one dance a month, so there'd be a party going on every single week. And for a really long time, life didn't get any easier and we still haven't managed to stop the curse, but you'll see…"

Smiling, he slows to a stop and raises his glass, making all of us follow his lead.

"A couple of glasses of this and you'll not only fall in love with the taste, you'll put all our remaining differences aside and just. Have. Fun."

A smile tugs at my lips and at the same moment as everyone else, I down the alcohol, the liquid burning my throat and sending a wave of pleasant heat down my body.

"Well," Hilde says as she clears her throat, "it *is* whiskey, but I actually like it."

"Yeah, me too," I say in a soft, pensive voice as I watch students, both Fiains and Grimms, start approaching Howe.

Glad I could come, he said.

It surprises me, when he just keeps talking to the people he's found himself surrounded by.

And all of a sudden, I feel so stupid, thinking he'd come back to talk to us. As if we're anything to him.

"Look, Nyx," I hear Hilde say, "they're playing Shufflesnake over there."

I make myself turn to where she's pointing, but my mind is wholly on His Hotness and how infuriating it all is, this game he's playing. Making everyone think he's this super attentive guy when he's in fact just like everyone else. A self-serving, manipulative people pleaser.

"Nyx?" Hilde's voice snaps me out of it.

I turn to look at her, wondering if maybe I should just leave.

"What's the matter with you?" my cousin asks with a little frown.

"Nothing, Hilde," I tell her, deciding to stop with the pouty nonsense. "Shufflesnake, you say?" I ask as I let my eyes sweep over my surroundings. And there they are, to my left, the Grimms sitting cross-legged in a circle around one of the fires, laughing as they play the Mind Magic game.

But it's not just them, it's everyone around me that seems to be having fun — chatting, dancing, playing other games.

I'm at a party, I remind myself, and it might seem rude for me to leave this soon, so I may as well have some fun while I'm here.

So when I turn my eyes back onto Hilde, there's a devious little smile on my lips. I motion at the Shufflesnake circle. "Why don't we join them?"

Her face instantly lights up and I roll my eyes at her, but I don't stop smiling as I start leading the way.

*

Still chuckling at how I kept making Hilde lose her focus, I excuse myself and I start walking down the plateau in the direction of the castle.

I sense him even before I hear him. "Leaving so soon?"

I stop midstep, turning to look at him and feeling a flood of relief when I realize the alcohol is doing its thing. I seem to be able to look into his eyes without feeling my brain desert me. "You did a great job, you know," I say with a smile. "Everyone seems to be having fun. But yeah, I have to go now."

And I give him a little wave and turn to walk away.

"Won't even stick around for the bonfire?" he asks as he comes to block my way, one hand in his pocket and one holding a glass.

I just look at him for a second. "Look," I start, blowing a soft laugh through my nose. "I see what you're doing and I respect it. It's just not something you have to do with *me*."

Smiling, he squints at me. "And what am I doing exactly?"

I motion at the party all around us. “Trying to sell the whole unity thing to everyone. But I’m already sold,” I tell him earnestly. “I want this whole thing to work out just as much as you do.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I despise cliches, but I don’t let that stop me from understanding how important it is for us all to finally start sticking together.”

He just looks at me for a second. Then he takes a step closer. “Then stick around for a while longer. Judging by today’s outfit,” he says, his eyes darting to my ripped tights and baggy sweater, “it can’t be some formal dinner you’re rushing off to.”

It makes me notice these little creases around his eyes that make them even more attractive when he squints at me.

“How would you know?” I demand, motioning at Lilith Tower in the distance behind me. “I have over twenty dresses waiting for me up there, like soldiers ready for battle.”

“That only makes it sting more, that you didn’t show up in one,” he says as he takes another step closer, his eyes diving deeper into mine.

And there’s that annoying flutter in my chest again. “Really?” I ask, staring to feel a little defensive. “Do you and my closet need some alone time perhaps? I’d never think so, but hey, I sure as hell won’t be judging.”

“Oh I doubt that,” he says with a shake of his head. “I think I know you better by now, princess.”

And it’s obvious he’s teasing me, but the way he mouths the word princess makes my mind linger on how sensual his lips are, and then there’s this ping from my phone, and all of a sudden, I’m finding myself taking a step back, my eyebrows pulling down when I realize I’m letting this asshole charm me into buying into his act like he’s charmed everyone else.

I grit my teeth. “I don’t know what you *think* you know about any of us here,” I mutter, “but you don’t. Got it?”

There’s a flash of surprise in his eyes before he raises his hands in defense and says, “Hey, sorry if I offended you somehow.”

It makes a pang of regret shoot through me, but it’s at the very next second that I sense someone else’s presence.

“Step away from her,” I hear my fiance’s voice even before my head snaps to my left to see him standing an arm-length away.

“Whoa, mate,” Howe protests as he puts distance between us, “what’s going on?”

“Get over here, Anastasya,” Max snaps at me.

And I do, throwing a glance at Howe, who’s frowning. “You’re being rude, Max.”

“Rude?” he demands with bitterness in his voice. “I was in a very important meeting tonight, when I got summoned to the Pied Piper’s office.” He pauses for a second, watching my eyebrows pull down. “Do you know what I learned there?”

I shake my head.

“I learned that there’s been a fucking murder.”

What the… My eyes dart to Howe, who takes a step closer to us, his frown growing deeper.

“But do you know what makes it even more interesting?” my fiance asks.

“What?”

He points at Howe. “That they have one of *them* locked up. Caught red-handed, both literally and figuratively.”

“Ricky?” I hear Howe ask in a tense, commanding voice that sends shivers running up my spine. “The one they have locked up, is his name Eryndor?”

“I neither know nor care what his name is,” Max snaps as he turns to him, “but mark my words, there *will* be repercussions. Right now, you’re wanted in the Grimm Tower.” And he shifts his focus onto me, grabbing my upper arm. “Come on, Anastasya, we’re leaving.”

It makes my cheeks burn with embarrassment. “I should take him where he has to go,” I protest.

He shoots me a warning look. “No fiance of mine will ever find herself in the same room as a common criminal.”

I hesitate for a second, my eyes darting back to Howe only to find him already looking, standing there, his eyes piercing holes in me. Fuck. “Hilde,” I tell him, apologetically. “Hilde will take you there.”

“I can go myself,” he replies flatly but through gritted teeth. And he looks at me for a second longer before he adds, mockingly, “Your Highness.”

And with that, he pushes past us and starts climbing up the slope and straight for Grimm Tower.

“Anastasya,” Max calls out, impatience in his voice, but I keep my eyes fixed on the alpha’s back for a second longer. It makes my heart sink deep

into my stomach, watching the now solitary shadow getting swallowed by the tower's silhouette piercing the starless night sky.

Chapter 10 - Dahrian

Local Authority Office, sentencing, *common criminal…* The words keep echoing through my mind and I have to fight not to snarl at the guard to make him go faster. I'm fuming, barely keeping my fox contained. Whenever one of our own is threatened, he gets even less reasonable than usual. And right now, if I let him do what he wanted, we'd all end up in pools of our own blood.

So I grit my teeth and I just keep following the guard, step by step, down from the Pied Piper's office at the top of somber, minimalist Grimm Tower. In my head, I'm going through the conversation I just had with her assistant. Apparently, the forensics have already done their jobs and the Academy knows exactly what happened and how.

And sometime tomorrow, they'll be sending Ricky to the local Authority Office.

Ricky, the gentle nerd who wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone *murder* someone in cold blood.

"Be sure to keep in mind," the assistant told me in her mousy voice, "that this visit has only been granted because of your impeccable reputation."

It makes me grit my teeth, how heartless all the people here are. But that only gets an image of a certain Romanov flashing through my head.

I shake it off and I blow out an angry breath, turning my attention back to the guard. "Where exactly are you keeping him? In the fucking dungeon?"

And the guard stops right when we land on floor number five, at least judging by the gold digit to the left of the Elevator.

He turns to me, frowning. “Exactly where we found him, *mate*,” he says, mocking me.

My eyebrows pull down as I watch him walk across the large round landing, all in expensive wood, and up to one of the five doors along the wall. There’s bright yellow Authority tape barring entry, but he just opens the door and cranes his neck to throw me one of those I-don’t-have-all-day kinds of looks.

I rush over to him, moving to walk through the door, but he blocks me with his arm. “You have exactly fifteen minutes,” he says flatly. “And don’t bother trying to mess with anything, all evidence has already been gathered.”

For a second, I just look at him. Then, despite all my efforts, my fox comes out enough to let out a low growl.

Fear flashes through the man’s face. He clears his throat and removes his arm. “Just saying,” he adds in a voice that’s no longer all that indifferent.

“You know what’s funny?” I demand as I lock eyes with him. “There didn’t even have to be a murder for you people to brand us as criminals. You did that before we ever even got here.”

I keep staring straight into his eyes until he looks away, unease written all over his face. Then he spits out, “Fifteen minutes and then I’m coming in.”

And he walks away, going to stand by the door opposite the one I’m about to walk through.

I force myself to shake it off. I take a deep breath and I walk inside, closing the door behind me. The only light is coming through a small paneled window to my left.

“Dahrian?” I hear Ricky’s feeble voice sound from somewhere to my right.

But I’m busy trying to process the sight before me. I’m in an office with stone walls lined with bookshelves and a large desk dominating the space, but that’s where the normalcy stops.

There’s the body still lying there, in the middle of the floor, a pool of blood spreading from its torso.

And there’s my friend crouching in the far right corner, his entire body covered in blood, including the hands he has clutching his upper arms. It’s scared, the look he’s throwing me.

Speechless, I come rushing over, holding out a hand for him. “In the name of Lycan, Ricky,” I mutter, “it’s at the scene of the crime they’re keeping you?”

He doesn’t take my hand. He looks away. “It’s just the procedure here,” he replies in a brave but a little shaky voice.

I push my anger aside and I sit down in front of him. “Hey, tell me what happened.”

He looks up at me, his eyes murky and still with shock. “I wanted to have a chat with Professor Onas. I only wanted to get information about the different types of magic foliage around the castle grounds, that’s all,” he explains in a pleading voice.

And his gaze darts to the body lying behind me and his breathing instantly becomes heavier. It all makes my heart drop into my stomach.

But I summon all the determination I can, and I make him look at me. “And?”

He shakes his head. “I came by his office and I knocked.” Grimacing as he tries to fight back the tears, he says, “I shouldn’t have done it.”

“You shouldn’t have done *what*?” I demand.

“No one responded to my knocking, but the door was open…”

“And?”

“And I went inside and I found him lying there. He was dead already,” he insists, desperation in both his eyes and voice. “I swear to you, Boss. I swear on my family’s graves.”

I have to fight not to give into temptation, to just start consoling him. My eyes dart to his bloodied hands and clothes. “What about the blood, Ricky?”

He looks down and there’s a flash of surprise in his eyes as he holds out his hands. “I slipped. It was so dark in here. I didn’t see the blood and I walked straight into it.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I curse.

“You don’t believe me?” Ricky asks with a fearful look in his eyes.

“Of course I believe you, mate,” I tell him with determination in my voice. “But you know what they’re saying?”

He doesn’t say anything, but I can practically see him hold his breath.

“They’re saying they’ve managed to get inside the man’s head and get his last memory.”

“And?”

I shake my head, fighting not to show how concerned I am. “He didn’t see a face. Someone attacked him from behind, threatening to kill him if he didn’t provide information on getting the mermaids to break their contract.”

I see Ricky frown. “The contract they signed not to attack any of the students while we’re here?”

I nod, watching his face fall. And I don’t want to add to his troubles, but this might mean the difference between life and death to all of us.

“Don’t get me wrong, Ricky,” I tell him in the gentlest voice I can muster, “but before we arrived, when I found out about the Sobbing Lake, you explicitly told me the mermaids wouldn’t be a problem.”

“I thought the contract would be enough for them not to be,” he says, a little pensively.

“You no longer think that?”

He gives me something between a shake and a nod, obviously too rattled for me to expect him to think like he usually does.

“Why don’t you tell me everything you know about mermaids in general and I’ll take it from there,” I ask.

I watch him breathe a sigh of relief. “Sure, Boss.” He pauses for a second before he asks, “You’re familiar with the fairy tale?”

I nod. “The mermaid who fell in love with a Scion prince and made a deal with a fae to give her legs instead of fins.”

He shakes his head, but it makes me happy to see his lips curl into a sad little smile. “That’s just what the Scions tell their kids, even now. She wasn’t originally a mermaid.” He pauses a little. “Mermaids aren’t *born*, they’re *made*.”

I frown, which nudges him to go on.

“Just like the rest of them,” he says, “the Little Mermaid was a fae woman captured by Scion sailors and thrown overboard for good luck.”

“What the fuck?”

“Yeah. It’s just that back then, the Scions didn’t know what they were actually doing.”

“What were they doing?”

“They were forcing faes to use their magic to adjust to a completely different environment. Instead of dying, they grew fins and kept living underwater, exacting vengeance with their song whenever they’d come across sailors.”

I feel myself losing the thread of the conversation. “That sounds nothing like the fairy tale I know of.”

He shakes his head. “The Little Mermaid… She wasn’t trying to get closer to some stranger that just happened to catch her eye.” He pauses before he explains, “She was trying to get back to her original form so she could be reunited with her fiance.”

For a second, I stay silent. “Shit, that’s depressing.”

He lets out a sad little smile.

“But what’s their nature?” I ask. “The contract… Would they go back on their word like that?”

He shakes his head. “I’d been persuaded into thinking they wouldn’t. But I don’t know anymore, Boss. They don’t like attention and there’s not a lot we know about them.”

I nod thoughtfully, my concern only growing bigger.

“Does that mean the killer didn’t learn anything useful?” Ricky asks.

I have to fight not to let out a sigh. Instead, I just shake my head. “Apparently not. The professor wouldn’t say a word so he or she made good on their threat. And then, then they found *you* here.” And I look deeper into his eyes.

He just returns the stare for a second.

“Boss,” he finally asks, in a lower, more anxious voice, “how are we going to get out of this?”

I hesitate, gritting my teeth just thinking about it all. How stupid was I, throwing this party in the hopes of making friends with the Grimms when I should’ve been watching my pack more closely?

An image of her pops into my head. The future princess whose role in life will be to perpetuate injustice like this, perched atop her high horse.

What snaps me out of my ruminations is the series of sharp knocks on the office door behind my back. It seems my fifteen minutes have run out.

Feeling myself starting to fume again, I jump to my feet and I tell my friend, “I don’t know how exactly we’ll get out of this. I just know there’s no one here we can count on.”

And even before I see fear flash through his eyes, I make myself say, in a much more determined, upbeat voice, “But don’t worry, I’ll take care of it, Ricky.”

I pause to look around the room, gritting my teeth. “And my first order of business is getting you out of this sick fucking joke they put you in.”

Chapter II - Nyx

Riddled with guilt, I toss and I turn in my bed. They keeps echoing through my mind, all the things I heard when we got summoned to the Dining Hall, right after the party.

Professor Onas getting stabbed to death in his office.

Someone at the Academy looking for information on how to piss off the mermaids.

Eryndor, a Fiain without a last name and Dahrian Howe's right hand, waiting for the Authority to come hurl him into jail.

But what troubles me most is something I've seen with my own two eyes. Once the Pied Piper finished divulging all this information and we started filing out of the Dining Hall, I spotted one of the Authority Officers march up to Uncle and give him something. A book.

Then they said bye and that was that.

But right now, there's a student sitting in a cell, thinking he'll be thrown in jail, when there's a chance he did nothing at all.

It's only when the first rays of cold morning light enter my room that I decide I've had enough of trying to fall asleep.

It's time to take action.

I spring from my bed and start getting dressed. As I look at myself in the mirror, my mind rushes back to Max. How unnecessarily rude he was when

he came to the party. How embarrassed it made me, him ordering me around like that.

I tried to talk to him about it, but he just stayed silent, ignoring my protests. So I went to the Dining Hall to hear what they had to say and then straight to bed.

But now he's texting me, all sweet, asking to see me. And I'll have to do it at some point today, but I'm not ready to confront him yet. I'm not sure how I feel. He was the asshole, so why do I feel guilty? In any case, I have more pressing things to do.

So I finish getting dressed and I rush down into the Common Room, stopping on the lowest step.

There are small groups of students here and there, but they're unusually quiet, huddled around their tables, whispering, showing each other stuff on their phones.

It's when I hear a quiet sniffle that my head snaps to my left and I see an older fae-blooded woman approach me, carrying a bunch of papers with her eyes fixed on the staircase pillar right next to me.

*

Without giving me so much as a glance, the woman takes one paper and starts taping it to the pillar.

Frowning, I walk around her to see what it is.

"Missing," the flier says, in large block letters, "a green journal embossed with initials RO. Reward: 1,000 aureons.

And then the contact number.

My eye gets drawn to the woman again. She must be Professor Onas' wife or something. A pang of sympathy shoots through me.

Once she's finished taping it, the woman turns on her heel and finds herself face to face with me. "The Authority are saying it's not important," she tells me, in a distant, mournful voice of someone who's just been through a shock, "but it's missing. How can it not be important?"

And she's not really asking. I don't think she even sees me, not really. She staggers off, sniffling, disappearing through the archway and down the stairs, leaving me standing there in dumbfounded silence.

I force myself to snap out of it. I turn on my heel and start walking to my usual table.

And there she is, Hilde, sitting in our spot, a cup of piping-hot coffee in her hand and her eyes on her phone screen.

I forget she's an early riser.

"Morning," she says as she looks up from whatever she's reading. Her face is lit up. "You won't believe the things people are saying about this. It's like some mystery novel."

"A cheap one, I'm guessing," I say flatly as I throw myself in my own chair. And I really don't like the type of enthusiasm my cousin is bringing to this, but I'm all ears all the same. "Could I get a summary of some kind?"

She beams at me. "Sure," she says. And then she leans a little forward and starts in a voice that's barely above a whisper, "So, this Fiain girl says Eryndor, the main suspect, used to be invisible, back at their Academy. Right up until a year ago, when all of a sudden he started making friends and became their alpha's right hand."

I just blink at her for a second. "Hilde," I start, in a voice that's as patient as I can make it, "you're describing an introvert who overcame his shyness."

"Hm," she says, thinking for a second. "I guess you're right, but listen to this. One of ours managed to get his hands on the memory they got from Professor's head."

My eyebrows shoot up, but instead of going into more detail, Hilde shoves her phone under my nose.

It's a comment on one of the posts on the main Academy board.

"Holy shit, everyone, I just saw the memory and it's so fucking creepy. You can see when the professor gets grabbed by the way he stops putting his bag away and looks up, staring at some spot on the empty wall before him. And then this raspy voice threatening him. Whatever I do, I can't shake it off! We have a killer at the Academy. Just hope they take him to prison as soon as possible."

It gives me the creeps, reading about it. But what my mind chooses to linger on is the word 'raspy.' I know I heard him talk once, in passing.

"Hilde?" I ask, still staring at the screen. "Have you ever spoken to Eryndor?"

"No, but I did see him a couple of times. He's actually kind of cute."

I look up. "Would you say he'd have a raspy voice?"

She thinks for a second. Then she frowns. "No," she says. "No, I wouldn't. But I knew this one girl in high school who…"

I stop paying attention to her. It's still the crack of dawn, but the Pied Piper did say the Authority Officers will be here first thing in the morning.

And right now, all I can think about is Uncle Ludwig calling my name in his raspy, raspy voice.

But more importantly, the flush on his cheeks when he took the book out of that Officer's hand.

The book that may as well have been a journal.

So I get up and I start marching out of the Common Room, only one thing on my mind. But before I even reach the steps, Max comes to block my way.

*

"Still mad at me?" he asks, throwing me his most apologetic look.

I take a deep breath and I force myself to say, "Actually, I am."

"Anastasya," he urges as he comes to take my hand in his, "I'd just found out there'd been a murder and I found you standing there, chatting with one of them." He throws me an incredulous look. "How was I supposed to know you weren't in *immediate* fucking danger?" And he waves a finger in front of me. "You know, there are plenty of women out there who'd appreciate it, their future husbands caring about their safety. Even if they weren't princes."

I let out a frustrated breath, but I don't pull my hand out of his. "Max, I'm not mad that you got scared for me." I shake my head. "I'm not even mad that you let yourself be incredibly insensitive to an unsuspecting guest."

"Unsuspecting guest my ass," he cuts in, snatching his hand away.

"Will you stop it already?" I urge him.

He just looks at me for a second. Then he smiles and says, "Fine." And he takes a step closer, taking my hand again. "But if it's not that which bothers you, what's the problem then?"

For one long moment, I stay silent, feeling such reluctance to even mention it. When I finally speak, it's a plea in a hushed voice, "You can't *order* me to come with you, Max. You can *ask*, but you can't order."

He gives me a little frown. "I didn't *order* you to do anything."

"Yes you did, you *ordered* me," I insist, feeling myself fuming. "You said 'Get over here, Anastasya.' That sounds like an order to me."

He sighs and throws his hands out. "Come on, Anastasya, this again? You imagine these slights, and then blame *me*? Did I say I order you? Did I push you? Hit you?"

“But you can’t talk to me that way,” I say, a little unsure now that maybe he didn’t really *order* me, but it was still not okay, what happened. “You should respect me, and act like it,” I say, feeling myself choking up.

“Here we go with the tears again,” he steps closer and takes me by the hand. “Why do you keep doing this to yourself, cupcake? You know I respect you. You know I love you.”

My heart softens as he pulls me into a hug. He does love me, and he does show it.

His voice is tender in my ear when he says, “Why can’t we just be happy?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, pulling him into a tighter hug.

“That’s okay, cupcake. I love you anyway.” He pulls away and looks at me lovingly, but there’s something else in his eyes.

Raising my eyebrows, I nudge him to talk.

“I was hoping to talk to you about something, but…” And he moves to pull away, but I don’t let him.

“Tell me,” I say, determination in my eyes. I have to do better. *Be better.*

“Don’t worry about it, it’s too much for you right now,” he says, the words stinging deep inside.

“*Tell me*,” I urge, pulling away and grabbing his hand.

“Well, if you insist,” he says as he comes to wrap his arms around me again. “Two things,” he leans to say into my ear. “At least until the investigation is over, I want to know where you are at all times.”

The request makes me frown. I’m a big girl, I think to myself. But then again, how can I refuse him in a situation like this? So I nod and put my arms around his shoulders.

“And I want to move the wedding date up,” he adds. “I’m thinking winter break.”

It makes me pull away a little, so I can look into his eyes. “Why?” I finally ask, squinting at him.

“It’s made me realize things,” he says with a warm smile, “all this shit happening.” He gives me a kiss. “I don’t want to delay our happiness any longer than necessary.”

The words make me warm around the heart. Still, I can’t help but panic. That’s, like, three months from now instead of six. And there’s this resistance to it and my mind is buzzing just thinking about all the work

changing the date would entail, and besides, I don't think three more months would kill us.

But he's raising his eyebrows at me in a silent plea and I decide not to let myself ruin this moment.

So I dismiss it all and I nod, giving him a wide smile. "Yes, let's do it."

He beams at me. "You don't know how happy you've made me, cupcake."

And he gives me a kiss.

I pull away, throwing him another smile as I move to walk past him.

It's with a click of his tongue that he stops me, reminding me of our newest deal.

"I'll just be stopping by Uncle's," I tell him.

And he smiles, turns on his heel and starts making his way across the Common Room.

He'd have no reason to do it. Still, I'm glad he didn't ask what I wanted with Uncle this morning. I'm not too eager for the family to find out about my plan.

*

Feeling lightheaded at the very thought of what I'm about to do, I make my way up the Grimm Tower's wide stone steps. It's still so early in the morning, the light that's falling through narrow windows is casting long shadows down the cold, meticulously brushed stone walls.

The Tower seems to be completely deserted, the only sound being the faded flags flapping in the otherwise barely perceptible breeze. They're all staying away from their offices today, as I believe I would if I were in their shoes.

When I find myself on the sixth floor landing and I stop in front of his door, for a second, I hesitate.

What if he's in there? What am I going to tell him?

Hi Uncle, I've come to interrogate you about the murder that happened last night. Wondering if you had anything to do with it? Oh, is that a scone you have there? Mind if I help myself?

No, I tell myself. If he's innocent, he probably won't even be in. And if he's not… Well, I don't have to jump *straight* to the point, right?

So I force myself to knock.

Silence.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

And just as I'm about to move away from the door, I hear footsteps from the other side.

Fuck. I watch the door slowly open, but only enough to reveal my uncle's pale, bony face and the anxiousness in his eyes.

"Morning, Uncle," I say.

The anxiousness disappears as soon as he realizes it's me. "Anastasya," he whispers and then swings the door fully open, motioning for me to come in. "How good it is to see you."

I walk inside, wasting no time in scanning his office. It's just as silent and cramped as usual, like some medieval hermit's. The centerpiece is the carved ebony desk, the only surface in the room that's not completely covered in books and scrolls. Behind it, there's a fireplace filled with ash, old and heavily used.

"Are you here for a consultation?" I hear Uncle ask and I make myself turn to face him.

"Not exactly," I say as I lower myself in an armchair opposite the desk.

"Don't tell me you and Nikolay are fighting again," he says with a tired smile and sits in his regular chair, an oddly plain and uncomfortable one.

This makes my lips curl into a sad smile. I don't know what he's talking about because I've never come to complain to him about my brother. Maybe he's remembering something from our childhood.

"Nikolay and I are fighting the same amount as usual, nothing to worry about."

Now, that makes Uncle frown a little, as if he's finally catching up on the fact this is no regular student or family visit.

"Uncle," I start, forcing determination into my voice, "I'm here because of what happened last night."

There it is again, the flash of anxiousness in his eyes. "Oh, you mean the murder," he says flatly. He clears his throat, looking away for a second. "Don't worry about it, my dear. As the Pied Piper said last night, the culprit has already been caught."

I just look at him for a second. The Ludwig Schwarz that *I* know would be eager to gossip, just like his other niece, Hilde. "Um," I stutter, but I quickly collect myself. "Sure, that's what they're saying. But I don't know if it's true. It just doesn't hold up."

And I lock eyes with him, not letting him look away.

He stays silent for a second. “Doesn’t hold up?” he finally echoes with a weak smile. He leans back in his chair, clasping his hands. “A vengeful Fiain comes to Grimm Academy with a plan to exact revenge. He does what he does, gets caught and ends up in jail. It seems pretty straightforward to me.”

“Yes, until you actually think about it, that is.”

His eyes narrow. “What do you mean?”

“A Fiain exacting revenge by pissing off creatures that would first hurt his own?”

“So?” he demands, leaning to rest his forearms on his desk. And his gaze is unwavering now, but his voice is not entirely flat when he says, “There are people in this world who would do a lot worse to get what they want.”

“I guess that’s true,” I concede. “But that doesn’t answer the most pressing question of all.”

“Which is?”

“Why he just stayed there after he did it. Why didn’t he leave, try to run, shift, whatever?”

Uncle shakes his head, pressing his lips tight. “Who knows what goes on in a sick person’s mind.”

“So you think it’s sick, what he did?”

“Of course I do,” he rushes to say. “Which is why I think we should discuss it no more. It’s not a topic suited for a young, impressionable mind.” He looks around his desk, his eyes fixing on a stack of papers to his right. “Now,” he says as he starts leafing through them, “your work in Blood Magic this year…”

My own eyes dart to the fireplace behind him. I spot a tiny flash of green amidst all the grays and blacks.

What did he do and why?

“You’re making some great progress, you know?” I hear him go on, but I decide to bite the bullet.

I look back at him and I say, my voice determined but slightly shaky, “I saw it.”

He freezes in place, his eyes darting to mine.

“I saw the Authority Officer give it to you last night.”

My heart skips a beat. He drops the papers and just keeps staring at me for a second, his breathing becoming shallower. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, dear,” he finally says, his voice low but warning.

I gulp. Too late to turn back now. My eyebrows pulling down in sympathy, I lean a little forward. “Please just tell me what happened, Uncle,” I beg him in the softest, most familiar voice I can muster. “We can make it so *no one* ends up in jail. I can help you.”

For one long moment, he just stares at me. I hold my breath, fully expecting him to start talking, for real.

Then, to my surprise, his jaw clenches and his cheeks flush.

“*Help me*?” he yells out as he rises out of his chair so suddenly, he knocks it over.

On instinct, I get up as well.

“You should stop playing detective,” he spits out, anger distorting his facial features, “that’s what you should do, you foolish girl. In case you forgot,” he says as he pokes the desk with his finger, “I’m a professor at Grimm Academy and an esteemed member of the vampire community. It was *me* they chose as the Guardian of the Obscura, a highest honor that is only given to persons of trust.”

It leaves me straight-up dumbfounded, his reaction. And it makes me believe I was right in thinking there was something fishy going on. This is not the uncle I know.

Fuck, I think as I keep staring at him. I don’t think I want this, to mess with family like this. So I give Uncle a curt nod and I turn to walk away.

“I won’t let them take this away from me,” he practically yells after me, making me stop midstep. “I’ve done nothing wrong, Anastasya, I’m a person of trust if ever there was one.”

I take a deep breath and I turn back to him, my voice low and cold, “If you’re so trustworthy, why don’t you tell me what it is you last burned in that fireplace?”

“Your mother will be hearing about this,” he snaps, still red in the face.

My blood boils. “There’s a boy being taken to jail for something he might not have done.”

“Okay,” he rushes to convince me, taking a step closer and wringing his hands, “you saw what you saw, but it was only about a meeting with Professor Onas that was penciled in at the wrong time. I assure you, you would’ve done the same.”

A meeting, really, I think to myself. I just look at him for a second, disappointed, pissed-off and scared all at once. “No, I wouldn’t,” I say through gritted teeth and I turn to walk out of his office.

He rushes to block my way. “What’re you going to do?”

I can barely stand to look at him. “I’m just going to tell the Authority where they can find the victim’s journal.”

“Please, don’t do this because of a stupid meeting.”

I just shake my head.

“In the name of Lilith, Anastasya,” he pleads, clasping his hands as he stares deeper into my eyes. “I’m your family. I’m a Romanov just like you are.”

Exactly my problem. I push past him and I open the door. I have to fight to keep my voice flat when I look over my shoulder to say, “Rest assured, Uncle. If you’re innocent, you’ve got nothing to fear.”

*

Shaking with emotion, I march all the way downstairs, where I heard they moved Eryndor. And just as I arrive at the landing of Level Minus One, which is the dungeons, the Elevator door opens and out step two somber-looking Authority Officers clad in their usual forest green uniforms.

My heart sinks deep into my stomach. Am I too late?

I am, I think as I watch them head straight for the stairs leading down and into the cells, their black boots loud against the stone floor.

“Wait a minute,” I call out, making them stop midstep and turn to me.

And it takes a bit of convincing and I only succeed because of who I am, but they do let me see him, to get fifteen minutes with him before they take him away.

I just need to make sure, I think as I rush down the stairs and into darkness broken only by torch light. I just need to make sure I won’t be potentially harming Uncle for someone who *is* the killer after all.

But when the guard opens the door for me and I step into the cold damp of the dungeon, it’s not just Eryndor I see there, huddled on a stone bench along the wall.

Sitting right next to him is his alpha, Dahrian.

And he’s staring straight at me.

My heart breaks into a gallop, my mind scrambling for an explanation as my eyes scan his face.

So serious, he looks more serious than I’ve ever seen him.

It’s been twelve hours and he still hasn’t left Eryndor’s side?

Chapter 12 - Dahrian

She barges in like she owns the place, making my eyes narrow and my jaw clench. My fox immediately stirs from his sleep, sticking his nose out to take a whiff of her.

Even now... I push him away, harsher than I normally do. She stops at the door and it gives me a smidge of satisfaction, seeing the surprise on her face when she spots me sitting next to my friend.

But it doesn't last long. It just turns into another sign of how shitty everything's turning out to be. It was a mistake, coming here, I think as I throw daggers at her.

"If you're looking for your boudoir, Your Highness," I tell her in a mocking voice, "this is not it."

Now *that* gets her worked up, her cheeks flushing with anger.

For fuck's sake, stop it, I tell myself, stop trying to get a reaction out of her.

She presses her lips tight and turns to look at Ricky. "I came to talk to *him*."

"Ricky?" I demand. "What's your business with *him*?"

"Dahrian," Ricky starts, but I don't let him finish. I don't take my eyes away from her, not for a second.

I get up, suddenly, making her flinch a little. And I walk up to her, slowly, this sinking feeling in my stomach as I burn holes in her eyes. "I don't think

you have any, so you may as well go back to Prince Charming," I tell her in a low, warning voice. An image of her flashes through my mind, that look she threw me when she got me pinned during the First Game. And the jolt of electricity it gave me.

Right now, it's a defiant one she's giving me. "The Authority Officers are already upstairs. Trust me," she says, "you're not doing him any good by turning me out."

I let out a bitter scoff. "*Trust you*?" And I look at her for a second longer, wondering how my instincts could've fooled me so badly. "You know what day we've had, Ricky and I?"

I have to ignore the way her eyes stay on mine, otherwise I wouldn't be able to go on. "I won't bore you describing the kind of accommodation your Academy provided until I intervened. I'll just say I highly doubt the investigation was carried out by the books. In fact," I say, pausing to throw daggers at her, "there seems to be a woman going around looking for an item the Authority claim they didn't find, even though Ricky clearly saw them throw it in the evidence box, didn't you, Ricky?"

And I turn to look at him, for the first time since she entered the room. My friend throws me a funny look and then glances at our esteemed visitor, giving her a nod.

I turn to look at her again, finding her pressing her lips even tighter, as if she's trying to control herself. "So no," I say, as flatly as I can, "I *won't* trust you. That's a mistake I've already made."

"Dahrian," I hear my friend call out and I look over my shoulder to throw daggers at him as well. "She's got nothing to do with that whatsoever."

I turn to face him, surprised that he'd be taking *her* side. "It's becoming obvious it's all corruption and power grabs here, Ricky." I throw a glance at her, her obvious silent fuming making me keep my eyes fixed on her. "And she's part of the problem, believe me."

She opens her mouth to say something, making me hold my breath in anticipation, but Ricky beats her to it.

"Still," he says, "with all due respect, it's *my* decision, whether she gets to talk to me."

I can tell she's surprised, too. I turn to look at my friend and when I see he's being serious, I force myself to come sit next to him. Still fuming, I fix my eyes on her, both of us waiting for her to speak.

She stays silent for a second, shifting on her feet. Then she looks straight at Ricky and says, “I know we’ve never met—”

“I know who you are,” Ricky cuts in.

She glances away awkwardly, making my anger die down a little. “I guess you would. But now I know who *you* are, too, Eryndor.”

“You can call me Ricky,” my friend tells her.

I shoot him an angry look, but he just shakes his head with a sad look in his eyes. I shrug it off.

“Ricky,” she repeats. “I wish we’d met under different circumstances.”

“Likewise.”

“Anyway,” she starts hesitantly, “I guess I wanted to ask if you could give me *your* version of the events from last night.”

I let out a scoff. “Didn’t know you were an Authority Officer.”

But that just earns me two annoyed glances.

“Sure,” Ricky starts, pretty warmly, considering. “As I already said, I went to ask Professor Onas some questions, I knocked and I went in, probably shouldn’t have, but I did, and then…” He pauses, making *her* shift on her feet with unease, and *me* grit my teeth because I know he’s in pain about this.

It makes old, unwanted memories surface, memories of my brother’s eyes closing never to open again.

“You don’t have to keep going,” I growl at him.

I feel her eyes dart to me. Fuck, this is all making it very hard for me to stay in control.

“I know,” Ricky says, “but I want to.” He pauses for a second, making her turn her attention back onto him. “Basically, what happened was this. It was dark, I slipped and I fell into a pool of blood. And then that student found me.”

I watch her watch him. And I can see the wheels turning in her head, judging. What right does she have to judge?

“I see,” she finally says. “Well, I guess the reason I’m asking is… I know there’s something weird going on and I can get you out.”

That makes my eyebrows pull down.

“What do you mean?” I hear Ricky ask, but I don’t take my eyes away from her.

She’s avoiding looking in my direction, and she seems extremely uncomfortable with what she’s about to say. It’s all making me hold my

breath.

"The item you mentioned," she continues hesitantly, "the one the Authority claim they didn't find, well, *I* did."

What the… I feel Ricky shift in his seat. But she's still refusing to look at me, making me even more persistent in staring at her.

And I can tell she feels me looking. Blood rushes to her cheeks as she says, "In my uncle's office."

There's a moment of silence before Ricky asks, "What does that mean?"

"I don't know exactly, but I do know they'll have to let you go as soon as I tell them."

My eyebrows pull down. Then I let out a scoff. "Yeah, right," I tell her, finally making her look at me. "Last night, you wouldn't even accompany a common criminal's friend to Grimm Tower, but today, you're willing to save said common criminal by throwing your esteemed uncle in jail instead."

You couldn't expect that from anyone, I think to myself.

She just looks at me for a second. "Maybe you can't judge a person by a single thing she does." She takes a step closer to me, making all my muscles tense up. "And maybe, just maybe," she drawls as she keeps her eyes on me, "I was right, yesterday, when I told you you don't know the first thing about me."

And she tears her eyes away from me and turns her focus back onto Ricky, leaving me too dumbfounded to say anything in response.

"I'll go now, but you can expect to be released soon," she tells him. "I only need to tell the officer upstairs I know exactly which one of their own regulations they broke in handling this case."

"Thank you, Miss Romanov," I hear Ricky say.

"Nyx, you can call me Nyx," she replies, throws him a tense but soft smile and turns to walk away.

I sit straighter, my fox poking his nose out to see if she'll say bye to me as well.

She only throws me a glance over her shoulder.

*

My mind buzzing, I try to focus on putting one foot in front of the other so we can get the fuck out of the castle and back at the camp as soon as possible. So it's only once the Elevator spits us out into the garden that I register Ricky throwing me glances.

“What is it?” I growl at him, immediately regretting the harsh tone. “Tell me,” I say, more softly, as I give him the side-eye.

My friend is still pale and obviously worn-out, but now, there’s a smile dancing on his lips. “I didn’t know you knew Nyx so intimately.”

“*Intimately*?” I echo, stopping to frown at him. He slows to a stop as well and tilts his head at me. “And who are *you* to talk, calling her Nyx like you’re fucking besties.” To *me*, she introduced herself as Anastasya. “I mean, I do understand she helped get you out, but it was probably her uncle who put you there in the first place.”

He gives me another funny smile. “You apparently already had time to have a fight about who you are or aren’t as people,” he says, completely ignoring everything I just said.

“That was just bullshit,” I protest.

And I go back to putting one foot in front of the other, headed straight for the slope leading down to the lake and wondering if it’ll be worth it, trying to save this day.

“I don’t know,” I hear Ricky say. “To be honest, when you two were talking in there, there was this vibe—”

“You’re in shock, Ricky,” I cut him off. Then I pause to ruffle his hair a little. “Maybe we should get your head checked out,” I say with a smile.

He rolls his eyes at me. “It just surprised me, is all. She’s nothing like the girls I normally see you with.”

My fox lets out a growl. *What is he trying to say*?

“Shut up,” I tell him.

“First smart thing to come out of your mouth, Ricky,” I tell my friend, making my voice as nonchalant as possible. “She’s grumpy as fuck.”

“Real character though,” my friend comments in a pensive voice.

I don’t say anything. I just imagine her, once again, standing there with an unwavering gaze as she told us what she learned.

I shake my head, forcing myself to shrug it off.

And it’s just then that I spot them, our pack, climbing up the slope to meet us. They rush to surround Ricky, inspecting him, patting him on the back and asking him questions, most of which I don’t catch because they’re talking over each other.

And it does make my lips curl into a soft smile, but it doesn’t really make me warm around the heart.

“So,” O’Malley Senior starts when we finally start walking back to the camp, “what’s the plan, Boss?”

“The plan?” I ask as I watch the rest of my ‘council’ fall into step with me.

“Yeah,” O’Malley Junior says. “They released him, but based on what you reported, in my humble opinion, this was open hostility.”

That makes me frown. Keep the peace, the Archon’s words echo in my mind. The last thing I need right now is for my entire team to think we’re at war with these people.

I stop and turn to look at Junior. With the corner of my eyes, I see Ricky throw me a glance, but then he just keeps going with the rest of them, leaving me to deal with this impromptu meeting.

“There’s been a fucking murder,” I drawl, my fox rising to the surface and making all my captains nervously shift on their feet. “A professor was murdered in his own fucking office and you think it’s open hostility for the administration to lock up the person found at the very crime scene?”

Judging by the way they’re avoiding my eye, I’ve successfully completed my mission.

“Whatever you say, Boss,” O’Malley brother says, trying to break the tension. “It’s just this thing with the mermaids and someone trying to get them to break their contract.”

For a second, I just look at them. Then I let out a sigh and I throw them a smile. “Look, everyone,” I say, realizing I have to turn this around somehow, “I’m not trying to say there are no bad people at this Academy. But this is an isolated incident, the act of some madman who probably has nothing to do with us or the Games.”

My eyes sweep over their faces and I see relief flooding them. It makes my muscles relax, when O’Malley Junior cracks a smile. I pat him on the back and we keep going down the slope.

They trust you, you know, my fox says. *Be careful not to betray that trust.*

“That’s not something I need to be told,” I reply with bitterness in my mouth.

He clicks his tongue. *I’m not sure, considering the way you behaved throughout this.*

“I *didn’t* lose control,” I insist.

You started thinking about your brother, he says, making me start to fume, *and that’s never good.*

"She made me mad. They all made me mad."

But mostly her. She went with that asshole of a prince and you let it get to you too much. Which only goes to prove my theory. You need to find a way to get her out of your system and you won't do that by avoiding her.

I almost laugh out loud. "You have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

Well, even if I'm wrong, there's one thing that's true…

"Really?"

Really. You're bringing home a member of the pack that was just accused of murder and I'll bet there's not a single person there that's looking forward to the next Game.

Now *that* makes me think.

He's right, I tell myself. The Second Game is in more than two months, but that doesn't mean I don't need to react as soon as possible. Things could easily take the wrong turn if I don't.

Luckily, I think to myself, it was the truth, what I told my captains a moment ago. An image of the future princess, a surprisingly principled princess, flashes through my mind. Not all people at this Academy are bad people.

And sure, maybe if she weren't engaged, maybe my thoughts would be elsewhere. But considering she *is*, at least I can look forward to watching her kick ass.

I decide to use the thrill that the thought sends coursing through me, and just as we reach the camp, I make everyone stop and I say, letting my voice boom, "Who wants to bet on what the next Game will be?"

And it gives me joy, to see all their faces light up with excitement.

Chapter 13 - Nyx

Normally, I'd find the snow covering the grounds outside comforting. But right now, I can't fucking stand it, the way the cold December sun is slanting through the stained glass windows in E13, making everything look so bleak.

Maybe it was a mistake to be so quick about this. I glance around the classroom only to find everyone still immersed in finishing the Blood Magic assignment, brewing a potion to purify their respective infected blood samples. Even Uncle looks as if he hasn't moved at all, sitting behind his desk to the front, scribbling in his notebook in complete silence.

I turn to the window once again. The light. The silence. A whole afternoon of tedious wedding preparations rounding the corner. It's all making me so desolate, I have to fight not to let out a sigh.

The clock strikes twelve.

"Your time has run out," I hear Uncle declare and I turn to watch him as he gets out of his chair for an inspection.

Even as he approaches the first row of desks, the students around me all scramble to get another ingredient in.

"Mr Fritz," he calls in a warning voice, making said guy freeze with his hand still in the air, hovering above the cauldron.

Uncle comes to stand next to his desk and Fritz lowers his hand, desolation clearly written on his face even before the judge and jury takes a

dropper out of his pocket, uses it to draw some of the potion out of the cauldron and then into the little vial perched on an elegant wooden stand.

The muddied, foul-smelling blood inside turns even darker, black almost.

Uncle clicks his tongue and says, “I know these are more complex diseases than the ones we’ve practiced with last year, Mr Fritz, but these results are shameful.”

He glances around the room, raising his voice to warn everyone present, “If I had to choose *one* thing for you to perfect, of everything there is to learn within Blood Magic, it would be blood *purification*.” He pauses for effect. “For a vampire, this is a matter of life or death. Have I made myself clear?”

There are soft yeses sounding from all around me. Seeming satisfied, Uncle nods and keeps going.

But as I watch him, it’s not blood purification I’m thinking of. Once again, my mind is threatening to drag me down the hole of thinking about the murder, the events of the First Game and Uncle’s involvement in all of it.

What if, right after class, I went to the Library real quick? I don’t really know what I’m looking for, but I’m bound to find *something*.

But it’s just at that moment that Uncle finishes inspecting the desk right behind me.

I glance inside my cauldron, checking if the potion is still the perfect color and texture. It is.

But when I hear Uncle’s footsteps again and I look up to meet his eyes, I see him walk straight past me without so much as a glance.

This again, I think as I burn holes in his back.

I grit my teeth, I take my own dropper out of the tool set and I test the potion myself.

The muddied, foul-smelling blood before me turns perfect, healthy looking, appetizing red.

But it gives me no joy. I guess I can understand Uncle, but it still pains me to be shunned by family like this — him, Mother, even Nikolay... After what happened the night of that party, Uncle didn’t even get a slap on the wrist, the green journal disappeared into thin air again, and now there’s this schizophrenic guy the professor used to work with claiming he was the one who murdered him.

And I *knew*, as soon as it happened, that Mother would be pulling strings to make it all go away. But what it's all even about… That I do *not* know.

Instantly, my mind starts buzzing in search of potential answers. Somehow, I don't think Uncle would kill someone himself. But helping someone in a crime like that… I look up to squint at him, but as soon as I do, I realize I'm doing it all over again.

For the millionth time, I decide I *won't* give in to temptation and keep researching what Mother specifically asked not to get into, *ever again*. I let out a sigh and I turn to look out the window.

The only thing worth living for right now is tomorrow's Game. The second one. And everyone has their own opinions, but a Game followed by the Winter Solstice Ball? That's got to be the best one.

No, Nyx, I tell myself, you've got hours and hours to go before it starts. And in the meantime, you've got shit to do. I make myself remember the long months at the Summer Palace, when I'd get so caught up in my daydreaming that I'd miss the dress gong, the tutoring sessions, the afternoon tea…

And then I'd get the whip, my governess making sure it never happened again.

No one tells you that at some point in life, you have to *become* the whip. Otherwise, you end up playing videogames all day long, like brother darling. And I can't do that. *He* might think it enough, to spend his entire life lording over nothing, but I plan to put it to good use, my future role as Princess.

And sometimes, that means handling tedious wedding preparations.

So as soon as Uncle finishes the inspection and the bell sounds, I spring from my chair and I rush out of the classroom.

It makes me stop midstep, when Max crosses my mind.

"Finished with Uncle's class, going to my room," I type to him.

"Thanks for the update, cupcake," he replies.

I keep walking down the hallway, elbowing my way through the crowd pouring out of the classrooms to my left and right.

But I really need to get a move on. The dressmaker will be showing up any minute now to shower me with color samples that all look the same.

So I dart through another, emptier hallway, and I rush down the stairs and into the Entrance Hall, my eyes fixing on the Elevator.

But then they get drawn a little to the right. There, in the middle of a crowd, I see Professor Onas' wife talking to the Pied Piper's assistant. Talking *at* her, that is, at least judging by the way the mousy vampire girl keeps looking away.

My heart skips a beat. I don't stop walking, but I do slow down a bit.

So as I push past them, I clearly hear the assistant say, "I'm sorry, Mrs Onas, but she's just too busy."

I subtly look over my shoulder and I see her walk away, leaving the woman standing there alone.

I stop midstep and I turn on my heel.

For a second, I hesitate. But the widow seems so miserable and I just can't help it.

I start walking over to her, catching her eye without knowing whether she'll recognize me.

She lights up as soon as she spots me. "Lady Romanov," she calls and comes to meet me halfway.

It takes me by surprise, but not as much as the way she just takes my hand in hers. I have to fight the urge to take it back, but the look she throws me, it's so warm, it makes the urge dissipate.

"Mrs Onas," I start, but she cuts me off.

"I apologize, dear," she says, "for not recognizing you back then…"

She doesn't finish the sentence, both our minds rushing to her husband's death.

And I have to muster all my determination, but I bite the bullet and I ask, "How have you been doing?"

She smiles, and the smile is still warm, but there's bitterness in it. "You're the first one who thought to ask. The others, well…"

I don't say anything, but I do nudge her to go on.

She takes in a sharp breath, as if in an attempt to stay in control, and says, "They won't give his stuff back."

That makes me frown.

"I know," she says with another weak smile. "I've only managed to get in touch with the Officer in charge of his case and the Pied Piper's assistant and they both say the same thing."

"What?"

"It's still evidence."

Bullshit, I think to myself. It's just the endless bureaucracy and the heartlessness of the system. But I don't say that. Especially as the future princess, I'm not allowed. "Have you filed any complaints?" I choose to ask.

Mrs Onas runs her hand over her face, letting out a small sigh. "I have. But I have no pull with the Authority and the Pied Piper won't even see me."

"That's outrageous, Mrs Onas."

"You think?" she asks. To my surprise, without a smidge of sarcasm in her voice. She shakes her head. "Sometimes, I think that it could just be me, you know, making a fuss over nothing."

"They're your late husband's possessions," I say through gritted teeth. "I honestly hope that people who'd say you're making a fuss over nothing would be in the minority."

She just looks at me for a second, her eyes filling with tears. "Thank you for saying that, dear," she squeezes out, her voice all choked up. "Now that he's gone, there's not a lot of kindness left in this world for me."

I have to fight not to look away, not to start crying right then and there. "The case," I say in a voice as flat as I can make it. "How close are they to actually closing it?"

She blinks the tears away and lets out a bitter laugh. "I don't think it'll ever happen, Lady Romanov."

My eyebrows shoot up. I nudge her to go on.

"That day, in your House's Common Room," she starts, her eyebrows pulling down, "I told you about the missing journal. They gave me photos of all the items they found in his office and asked me if I thought there was anything missing. And the journal was the first and only thing that popped into mind."

"But?"

She drops her voice to a near whisper. "But it *wasn't* the only thing missing from the list. I just couldn't think straight at the time."

Holding my breath, I ask, "What was it?"

She waves her hand, a smile tugging at her lips again. "For the life of me, I still can't remember the name. I mean, he'd talk about it from time to time, but he was an endlessly curious man who was constantly doing research on multiple magical items."

I have to fight the urge to just shake all the information out of her. Instead, I choose to start by asking, “Do you know what it looks like?”

“Yes,” she replies with a vigorous shake of her head. “Like a little coffin, the size of a finger. I mean, he used to make fun of me for thinking that, but that’s what it looked like to me. Especially when you think about what it does.”

Now, that makes my heart skip a beat. “*What* does it do?”

“Traps a being’s life force, at least in theory.”

“Interesting.”

“Yes,” she replies, but her mind is already elsewhere. “So you think I should keep pushing, dear? If they can’t find his…” She doesn’t say it, but we both know she means ‘killer’. “At least they can give me his stuff back.”

It makes me feel so sorry for her. “Let me see what I can do,” I say as I whip my phone out.

“Oh no, dear, no,” she says, waving her hands in protest.

“No stopping me *now*,” I reply as a name pops into my head. The perfect one. A Romanov Dynasty loyalist who also happens to be a very powerful man.

“In the name of Ydril, girl,” I hear Mrs Onas protest, the way she calls me ‘girl’ only making me like her even more, “you’ll think I came to greet you just to get a favor out of you.”

I raise a finger to ask her to wait as I type.

“Good day, General Alaric. I have a small favor to ask. I’d like the possessions of the murdered Grimm Academy’s professor returned to the deceased’s widow as soon as possible. Would you be able to help with that?”

Once I’m done and the text is sent, I turn my attention back onto the kind widow. She’s looking at me apprehensively. “It was *me* who came to talk to *you*, Mrs Onas, isn’t that right?”

“I guess it is,” she concedes with a slight, but growing smile.

My phone pings and both our eyes dart to it.

“Good day, Your Ladyship,” the reply reads. “It would be my utmost pleasure to fight the battle against bureaucracy for you. Send me the address and I will have the items delivered within two hours tops. My regards to your future husband.”

My lips tug into a smile. “Done,” I say as I look up at Mrs Onas, who’s staring at me with incredulousness in her eyes.

“Lady Romanov,” she whispers.

But there are wheels turning in my head. Two hours, he said. I may as well have the stuff delivered to *my* room first. That way, if luck serves me, I’ll be able to give her the satisfaction of the killer being caught as well.

So I make a snap decision, turning my attention back onto the widow. “Really no need to be so formal, Mrs Onas,” I tell her. “The possessions will all be delivered to you first thing in the morning.”

She just looks at me for a second. “You have my eternal gratitude, dear. I mean it.”

I try to force myself to say something, but it makes me uncomfortable, being in the spotlight like this. So I just nod and give her an awkward smile.

Have to learn to be better at this, I think as I turn on my heel and start walking away. For when I’m Princess.

*

It’s the softest knock, but it sends me springing from the bed on which I’m trying to pass the time.

When I fling the door open, I find that it really is the courier. There are two luggage carts with boxes of Professor Onas’ stuff behind him.

As he helps me get them all inside, I barely exchange two sentences with the guy. That’s how anxious I am to start. And I’ve rescheduled the dressmaker so I’ll have plenty of time.

So as soon as the courier closes the door behind him, I throw myself onto the bed and I grab one of the boxes, all neatly stacked at its foot.

Despite the eagerness, I don’t rip it open straight away. No one would bat an eye at me asking for a favor like this. I’m the only one who doesn’t do it *all the time*. And when I do, I’m smart about it. I don’t ask favors from people with obvious red flags.

But once I start looking through the things, there’s no going back. I will have disobeyed Mother’s orders to stop with the detective nonsense. And if anyone ever found out…

What’s the worst that could happen, I ask myself. The family would be even more disappointed with me? They’d make me sit through yet another extremely uncomfortable conversation followed by weeks of silent treatment?

I frown. The thought does *not* appeal to me.

But this is not just about getting a poor widow the satisfaction of her husband’s killer being thrown in jail.

If I catch the killer, I'll also have caught the person trying to sabotage the Games. And statistically, the killer is probably someone the professor knew.

So I rip the box open and start pulling stuff out, eagerly but with great care.

A framed picture of the professor and his wife.

An etui with a pair of glasses in it.

A pencil holder.

And a lot of books. Textbooks, to be more exact.

Alright, I think as I look up, my eyes sweeping over the other sixteen boxes. It would be downright weird if I found what I was looking for in the very first box.

So I dive in, determination in my every move.

I go through another box.

And another.

And another.

Until I get to the second to last and I stumble onto something shiny, a fist-sized rough crystal that feels weird to the touch. And as soon as I pull it out, it starts emitting this horribly annoying sound, like nails on chalkboard. It's only once the sound starts becoming louder that I realize the crystal is sucking in and amplifying all the sounds in my room.

I shove it back into the box and I close it shut, breathing a sigh of relief as soon as the sound dies down.

But it's only then that my mind processes it, what my eyes saw while I was closing it.

I open it back up and pull the shoe box out.

Hell yes, I think as I inspect the lid. Fuck elaborately carved wooden boxes, where people generally only keep the boring stuff, like jewelry. Even my mother, the Duchess Irina Nikolayevna Romanova, owns a shoe box in which she keeps her documents and some of her letters. Granted, it's a designer shoe box, but still.

Eagerly, I take the lid off, my mouth instantly cracking into a grin. Letters.

Bingo.

I start going through them like there's no tomorrow.

A letter from a girl who seemed to have been a high-school sweetheart, judging by the hearts dotting the Is.

A letter of acceptance into Grimm Academy.

And a bunch of letters, tied together with a string, from someone by the name of Cian Fitzpatrick.

As soon as I read the name, my eyebrows pull down. Cian Fitzpatrick… Where have I come across that name?

It almost instantly dawns on me. I spring from my bed and jump over the rest of the boxes to grab the book off my desk. *The History of Grimm Academy*. Frowning and holding my breath, I open it onto the page talking about the Games.

And there I find it. Cian Fitzpatrick, the name of the shifter professor who wrote the section.

I slam the book onto the desk, fixing my eyes ahead. It *could* be the killer. Someone Professor Onas knew. Someone who obviously had *some* kind of interest in the Games. Someone who could be holding a grudge against the Fiain Academy.

My heart pounding with excitement, I rush back to the bed and grab my phone. 'Cian Fitzpatrick', I type into the browser search box.

And I start scrolling.

No, I curse when my eyes stop on an article titled *The Death of One of the Topmost Scholars in His Field, Professor Cian Fitzpatrick*.

Four years ago. He's dead and he died four years ago.

Goddamn it. I shake my head and I go back to the letters. They're the closest to a lead that I currently have, but considering the man who wrote them is dead, I'm not in the least enthusiastic. I carefully untie the string and start reading.

Dear Ruvyn, it starts. That's Professor Onas' first name, I guess.

How are you, my friend? I hope the weather's not treating you too badly. I've spent many an hour in the Greenhouse and I know exactly how the old joints can react to its chilly air.

Ugh. I keep skimming the paragraphs, then pages, then whole letters.

And there's a lot of talk about lectures, research, students. But nothing of any interest to me whatsoever. Nothing that would implicate the old Fitzpatrick.

Until he ends one letter with the words:

I've finally finished it, old friend. The book I told you about almost ten years ago at that conference in the West Scion Lands. I know the Games can be a delicate topic, even after all this time, and you did warn me. You did say no one will want to publish it. So I did it myself, because I think it's

important to speak up about what happened and how the powers that be let a mere spat turn into the clash of the century. I just hope that, despite everything, it ends up finding its audience.

P.S. Yes, Ruvyn, you're getting your own copy, albeit an undeserved one.

Love,

Cian

Holy shit. I drop the letter onto my bed and look into the box, where I find the said book lying under a copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales. *How the Umbrage Could Have Been Avoided*, by Cian Fitzpatrick.

Isn't that just perfect. A book that I'm a hundred percent sure the Library doesn't have, because I've already read everything there is to read on the topic. And what I really want to do now is curl up with it, but I've no time to waste on *that*. After all, it's tomorrow that I'll have to return the Professor's stuff and I'm no closer to finding the killer than I was before I started opening these boxes, I think as I grab the very last one.

Nothing. It contains nothing of significance whatsoever.

I let out a sigh and I throw myself onto my back. I guess the next logical step would be to go through the books again, see if there are any inscriptions from other people with ties to the Games.

Why, oh why didn't he keep a contact book?

I hear my phone ping from somewhere and it sends a pang of anxiety shooting through me, but I choose to ignore it. I turn my head to the side and there it is, lying there, waiting for me. The book that might have some interesting insights on the Umbrage.

I guess it can't hurt, to at least crack it open and skim the contents. If I don't do it now, I'll never get the chance to do it again.

But just as I reach out my hand to take it, my phone starts ringing.

Ringing. Which can only mean one thing, I think as I sit up in my bed. Max.

My eyes dart to the window. Fuck. It's already dark out and I told him I'd be at the party in the Common Room in honor of tomorrow's Game. Like a warm-up of sorts.

And I'm late and I didn't even let him know.

*

There's that usual urge to rush down the stairs, maybe even run straight to our spot in the Common Room. It's the same desperate urge I get whenever someone's waiting for me.

Only this time, I choose to ignore it and I *walk* down the stairs, even slower than usual, with the book in my bag, no less.

The Common Room is buzzing, but as soon as my boots hit its hardwood floors, I spot them sitting in our spot, Nikolay gesturing as he recounts what must be his latest tall tale. I zoom in on the table, seeing that their drinks are already half finished. Despite wishing I could just go back up and take a long bath with the book in my hand, I force myself to start moving.

As I walk, I work on an excuse for canceling on the dressmaker. I don't want to tell anyone what I'm working on.

A headache, I think to myself. A really, *really* strong headache.

It's just as I'm about to walk up to the table that Max spots me, his eyebrows immediately pulling down. He gets up and appears right in front of me.

"I called," he says, a mix of concern and suspicion in his voice.

"I was already on my way out," I reply, feeling apologetic and a little defiant all at once. "I knew I'd see you straight away."

For a second, he just looks at me. Then he smiles. "That's fine, cupcake," he finally says, in a much softer voice, his mouth curling into a smile as he wraps his arm around my waist. "You just got me worried. And I don't think I'm asking for much — you letting me know, from time to time, where you are."

I shake my head, breathing a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry, Max," I say with a breathy laugh, and I give him a kiss on the lips. "I just seem to be out of it today."

"Let's get a drink in you then," he suggests with a smile.

And he takes my hand and leads me over to our table, Hilde throwing me a smile as Nikolay frowns at me.

"What?" I ask him as I throw myself into my armchair. "You look like you're either taking a shit or having your first idea ever. Which is it?"

I hear Max let out a chuckle.

Nikolay's eyes dart to him before they land back on me. "Ha ha," he drawls sarcastically. Then he takes a sip of his drink and slams the glass onto the table. "I thought you'd come parading in your new dress, oh sister darling," he says, squinting at me as if he can smell the lie I haven't even told.

"Maybe you should worry less about dresses and more about tomorrow's Game," I snap back, noticing Hilde squirming in her seat. "As far as I can

remember, it was almost as if you didn't participate in the last one."

My brother's face flushes in anger. "I'll start worrying about the Game as soon as you start filling out the dresses like you're supposed to."

"You little," I start through gritted teeth, getting up to smack him across the face.

Max pulls me back into the armchair while Hilde cuts in, nervousness in her voice, "Come on, you two, let's not fight today."

For a second, we keep staring each other down, my brother and I. Then he shakes his head and barks out a laugh. "We're just playing, aren't we, Nyx?"

Normally, that goofy look of his would melt away all my anger. And I do let out a breath and give him a smile, saying, "When are we not?"

But today, nothing seems to sit right.

So I lean back in my chair and I take out my book, deciding it would be best for everyone involved if I just tuned out.

"Hey," I hear Max say and I turn to find him glancing between me and the book in my hand.

"I'm doing your Theory of Magic homework," I say flatly and without hesitation. "Unless you don't want me to?"

He just looks at me for a second. "Such a good girl you are," he says with a wink, gives me a kiss and goes back to drinking and chatting with the other two.

And I guess it'd be wrong to say I'm proud of my short temper. And it does feel a little ridiculous, being at a party with my nose in a book. But it's nothing I'm not used to. And at least I get to have fun, instead of going around in circles in a conversation I'm barely part of.

The party raging around me, I just tune out and start reading. And the more I read, the more immersed I get. It really is original research, I think after a couple of pages. More thorough than anything I've read so far. And it goes into such interesting detail.

For example, it lists all the magical creatures that are said to have participated in the clash. It even includes a transcript of a conversation with one of the fighters, had while the said man was literally on his deathbed. Who knows how he managed to track him down? I skim whole pages, skipping all the info I already know.

Years, tactics, names.

Until my eyes linger on the following sentence:

“Wait a minute, back it up a bit. What was the name you just said?”

I frown, the manner of the question being uncharacteristic for the way the interview was being conducted up to that point.

So I go back a little, trying to identify the moment that led to it.

Yes, I think when I find it.

“Would you be able to remember, Mr Conrad, who you reported to while the clash was still ongoing?”

“Of course. Directly to Queen Vasilisa Romanov.” This makes my frown grow even deeper. “How could I forget? I mean, sure—”

“Wait a minute, back it up a bit. What was the name you just said?”

“Um… What did I say?”

“What did he say?”

“He said Queen Vasilisa Romanov. That’s what I put down anyway.”

“Mr Conrad, is that it? Did she write it down okay?”

“Mr Conrad, have you got something confused perhaps? There is no one by that name in our recorded history.”

“Mr Conrad?”

“Is it cold in here? Why is it so cold in here?”

And that’s where the transcript ends, followed by an explanation in brackets, saying that this was the moment they had to bring the doctor in and that the man died shortly after.

But it’s the name that keeps ringing in my head. Vasilisa Romanov.

Queen? Frowning, I let out a scoff.

For a second, I think that I must be losing my mind. Then I smile, realizing I was getting worked up about a dying man’s last jumbled-up thoughts. As Cian himself says in the interview, there is no one by that name in our recorded history, let alone a Queen. I should know. I was forced to learn the entire Romanov lineage, from the seventeenth century up to my father’s date of birth, even before I learned to read and write.

Still, it’s all so interesting. And now that Cian is done divulging all the information he’s managed to gather, he says he’ll be going into an analysis of sorts, giving three theories on why things ended the way they did.

I flip the page, eager to learn what they are.

But it’s at that exact moment that I hear a bout of cheering that’s hard to ignore. I look up to see Max, Nikolay and Hilde all squinting in the direction of the archway into the Common Room.

"*Someone's* popular," I hear Nikolay say. "Maybe we should go check things out."

Even if they do, I think to myself, I'm staying right where I am.

"Let the kids be," Max replies. "We're fine where we are."

Content with his decision, I turn my focus back onto my book.

But the noise only grows louder.

"Oh look, Nick, it's your buddy Dahrian," I hear Hilde say.

It instantly makes my ears prick up. I fail to stop myself from throwing a glance over my shoulder.

The first thing I spot is his smile, my heart instantly breaking into a gallop, then his eyes, then his arms, bare despite the cold. Howe. He's being dragged to one of the center tables by a gaggle of drunk vampire girls.

"Just what the party needed," Max snaps. "A Fiain asshole."

I quickly look away, fixing my eyes on my book. He didn't spot me, thank gods.

But all of a sudden, I really don't want to be here anymore.

I snap my book shut and I lean a little closer to Max. "Doesn't this party suck? I'm sure there are more interesting ones in Bloodholm."

"Lilith's wrath strike me dead," my brother exclaims with a burst of slightly off laughter.

I turn to throw daggers at him.

"One minute, you have your nose in your book, the other, you're looking to go party," he says with a squint. "You know, if you keep acting this strange, sis, I'll have to conclude you're planning another one of your little coups on our family. Who is it this time? Is it me?"

"Nikolay," I hear Max cut him off in an icy cold voice.

My brother lets out a nervous laugh and gets back to his drink. "So serious," he mutters under his breath.

I throw my fiance an appreciative look. "Max, you can do better than this," I ask as I throw a quick glance over my shoulder, "can't you?"

It's never been a mystery to me, the way Max's mind works.

He smiles and leans to give me a peck on the cheek. "In case you've forgotten, cupcake, I'm a fucking prince. I can *always* do better."

I smile and shake my head. Then I pull away to get my stuff.

"Where are you going?" Hilde asks, a touch of hopefulness in her voice.

But she doesn't get invited this time. "Wouldn't *you* like to know," Max replies with a smug smile.

It's distant, but I hear Howe's laughter boom from somewhere behind me.

"Let's go," I urge my fiance, tugging at his sleeve.

He waves to both my brother and my cousin, saying, "See you tomorrow at the meeting, Nikolay."

"I won't be able to make it, Max," Nikolay rushes to say.

Max stops, frowning.

"I'll have to walk Howe to Graf Field," my brother explains.

"Well, walk him after the meeting," Max says flatly.

Nikolay shrugs. "It's far. If I were alone, I could just run there. This way, we'll be late to the Game. So I think you should just do it without me."

That little fucker, I think as I stand there with my bag in my hand, ready to go. So dutiful about the whole buddy thing, but only when the alternative is a boring meeting.

"We need a family representative," Max tells him in a lower, more pissed-off voice.

"What?" I ask, my ears pricking up. "What's it about?"

They both ignore me.

"Nyx could do it," Nikolay finally says, a sour look on his face.

"Go to the meeting?" I rush to ask, excited at the prospect. "I don't know which, but sure."

"No," Nikolay snaps at me, "walk Howe to the Game."

I frown. "I don't think so," I say, even though I understand I'm the only option. We can't have the Fiain Academy alpha be escorted by anyone of lower rank. At least not if we don't want the Pied Piper to rip us a new one.

Max turns to squint at me, looking as if he's trying to weigh two equally bad options. Then he leads me a little to the side, making my ears prick up when he leans in to say, "Can I count on you to go straight to the Game and be on your best behavior?"

It gives me pause, the question. Then I shoot him a nasty look. "When am I *not* on my best behavior? Besides, I don't know why it always needs to be me, picking up Nikolay's messes."

"It is what it is, Anastasya," he snaps a little. Then the look on his face grows soft again. "Come on, cupcake, this is just being a good sport. And there are higher stakes at play."

Wish I knew what they were, I think to myself, but I don't say anything. I shake my head, pressing my lips tight, but then I nod.

Yes, it's just being a good sport. And why would it be a problem anyway?

*

It's with a knot in my throat that I put on my uniform. I come to stand in front of the mirror, delaying the departure for as long as possible. Turns out to be a horrible idea. Bony, I look so bony, I think with a frown.

But it's not like I can *do* anything about it.

So I make myself tear my eyes away from my reflection and leave my room, heading straight for the Entrance Hall, where His Hotness will be waiting for me.

I didn't want to do this, I think as I make my way down the stairs. I was just starting to put it all behind me, the whole incident with Max offending him, Ricky ending up in the dungeons, Howe looking at me as if I'm the embodiment of everything that's wrong with the world…

I cross the empty Common Room, recalling how rattled I felt for days after.

Since then, I haven't just been fearing I'd bump into him. I'd been straight out avoiding him, like that time, a couple of days after the incident, when I was leaving the cafeteria and saw him walking straight at me. I panicked, turned on my heel and just kept going the other way.

But then I managed to forget all about it, deciding it was all just a glitch in the system due to all the stress. Except for today, I've been focused on classes, training, the wedding preparations, spending more time with Max…

And for a second, it all seemed neatly wrapped up. Then they do *this* to me. Forcing me to spend more time with him, however little.

No, best not think about that, I decide as I ride the Elevator, all alone. As soon as it opens, I step out into the crowded Entrance Hall. Just put one foot in front of the other and that's that.

It doesn't take long to spot him, waiting by the Brothers Grimm statue, just like last time. Only this time, he's not on his phone. He's standing with his hands in his pockets, slowly scanning the crowd.

I take a deep breath and I keep walking.

But when I see his eyes land on me, nervousness takes hold of me, making all my muscles stiffen and one cold "Good day" leave my lips when I come to stand in front of him.

He raises his eyebrows at me. "Good day?" he echoes. Then he tilts his head a little, flashing me a smile. "Come on, there must be an even more formal way to greet me."

I should've resisted more, I think to myself, when they decided it would be me accompanying him. "I'm not here to live up to your expectations," I say flatly, "I'm here to take you to Graf Field."

He shakes his head, but he doesn't stop smiling. "You know, I had a feeling it'd be your cheerful self again."

"And you still came?"

He just looks at me for a second, seeming fucking *amused*. "I did. *Despite* what happened that time I came looking for you in the cafeteria."

For a second, that makes me frown, but then I realize what he's talking about. I don't show it. I motion for him to follow me back to the Elevator, saying, "Don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh," he starts as he falls into step beside me, a tinge of mockery in his voice, "it was a beautiful morning, the Academy was buzzing and I'd set out on a quest, to say thanks for what you did for Ricky." He pauses, making me give him a side-ways glance as we elbow our way through the crowd. "And I did spot this one girl that looked *just* like you. She saw me coming and went the other way."

We stop in front of the crowd waiting for the Elevator and I turn to face him, finding him already looking at me. "But I guess you'd never be that rude, right?" he asks, his eyes boring into mine as a smile dances on his lips.

"Me?" I ask, my eyebrows raising in feigned surprise. "Never."

And I turn to look ahead, frowning as I watch the crowd before us, how it's not getting any smaller.

"But in all seriousness," I hear him say, "you know it's not okay to refuse a man the chance to apologize?"

It makes me turn to look at him. And there's a light smile on his lips, but it's obvious he's being serious.

"Apologize?" I ask with a frown. "Why would you need to do that?"

"It wasn't right," he says matter-of-factly, "the way I treated you that night in the dungeon."

I shake my head. "Knowing what you know *now*, sure. But at that moment in time, you were only being protective of your own. And, well…" I pause, shrugging a little. "Maybe you *were* a bit hostile, but as I've already told you…" I throw him a sarcastic little squint. "Unlike some, I'm not a snowflake."

He lets out a soft laugh, his eyebrows raising at me.

It's at that moment I hear the Elevator door open and I turn to look back at the crowd. What I see makes me frown. Only a dozen or so people manage to get inside before the door closes again.

"What is it?" I hear Howe ask.

My eyes still fixed on the Elevator, I say, "It usually expands to fit as many people as it needs to." For fuck's sake, I think to myself as I let out a sigh. "But this," I tell Howe, "this means its magic is broken and gods know how long it'll take us to Graf Field."

"Can't we walk there or something?"

I turn to look at him, thinking. Straight to the Game, Max's words echo in my mind. Yes, I think this would be *his* preferred option as well. "I guess it *would* be faster," I finally say.

"Lead the way," Howe says with a grin.

"Alright."

And I motion for him to follow me out of the crowd, down the Entrance Hall, in the direction of the gallery.

"So, why does this keep happening?" I hear him ask as he starts walking beside me.

"You expecting me to read your mind?" I drawl with a smile. "I don't know. Laziness, self-centredness, could be a lot of things."

I hear him let out a rough laugh. "I'm talking about you doing your brother's duties."

Blood comes rushing to my cheeks. "My brother is busy," I protest, stopping and turning to look at him just as we reach the archway with a staircase leading down. "And besides, neither one of us is obliged to explain ourselves to you."

He shrugs his shoulders, that fucking smile still on his lips. "I just thought a princess would be busier than some duke."

It makes me so fucking mad. What right does he have to talk about me and my brother like that, I mutter to myself. My breathing heavy and my teeth gritting, I ask, "What do I have to do to make you understand that I'm not a fucking princess, *yet*?"

For a second, he just looks at me, the smile turning more cordial. "No worries," he says, softly but with a touch of ice in his voice, "you just did it."

My face still flushed, I feel a pang of regret, but I turn and I march through the archway, starting to make my way down the weathered, rarely

used stone stairs.

I hear him follow me, but he doesn't say a word.

We keep going down in silence, landing in a deserted hallway with classrooms on both sides, none of them in use at the moment, at least not to my knowledge.

A part of me expects him to fall into step beside me, but he doesn't. We cross hallway after hallway with him walking behind me in silence, making my heart sink and my mind struggle to focus on anything else.

So when we turn another corner and find ourselves at the start of another hallway, I'm scrambling to find a way to break the silence.

I glance over my shoulder and I spot him eyeing a painting to our left. I come to a stop and so does he. "It's from the fifteenth century," I say, watching him watch the oil-on-canvas depiction of a bride walking down the aisle of a church in ruins.

"What's with the coffins?" he asks, only shooting me a quick glance before he turns his attention back onto the painting.

I do the same. And it's a disturbing sight, a mixture of dark browns, blues and reds, with barely any light coming through the church's tall, broken windows, coffins lining the sides instead of pews.

"They're the coffins of the women that came before her," I say. "It's the Robber Bridegroom."

"The vampire?" he asks as he turns to look at me.

I nod. Then I point at the woman in a dirty white wedding dress. "See that right there? She has a blindfold on, suggesting she has no idea what she's walking into."

He stays silent for a second. Then I hear him ask, "You like it?"

I turn to frown at him. "*Like* it?"

"You seem to know a lot about it."

I let out an amused scoff. "I know a lot about the Second World War, too. Doesn't mean I have fuzzy feelings about it."

That makes a smile tug at his lips, my heart responding with a flood of relief.

"Is there anything here that you *do* like?"

I squint at him. "Why?"

"*Why*?" he echoes, his mouth cracking into that grin again. "Need an essay explaining my motives?" he asks teasingly. "Not sure it'd be up to your standards, but I can give it a go. What's the deadline?"

I roll my eyes at him, but there's a smile dancing on my lips. "Fine. Follow me."

And I turn to keep walking down the hallway, passing painting after painting until we reach the alcove.

I slow to a stop, sensing him do the same. I point at the statue nestled inside. "This," I say.

He stays silent for a second. "A peasant girl with a doll? Not what I expected."

"That's Vasilisa the Wise," I snap at him, albeit warmly, "a famous figure where I come from."

"Alright, alright," he says with a laugh, raising his arms in defense.

"See the embroidery on her dress? That's the traditional sun chariot depiction."

He takes a step to the side, to see what I'm pointing at, and he gets so close, I can feel the heat off his body. And I'm still staring at the statue, but my attention is wholly on his proximity.

"So what's the story behind this Vasilisa girl?" I hear him ask.

I think for a second. "You know Dame Gothel?" I don't wait for an answer because, well, of course he knows the most famous fae of all time, the witch from countless fairy tales. "Well, this is a story of one girl's encounter with one of the many recorded versions of her — Baba Yaga. It's basically about the girl being kicked out of her home by her evil stepmother and stepsisters to fetch firewood from the evil witch in the middle of the harshest winter."

I throw him a glance before I say with a soft laugh, "Of course, the three evil women thought that Baba Yaga would simply kill the girl and rid them of who they only viewed as another mouth to feed. But the girl's doll helped her win the witch over, return carrying fire in skulls, and turn the women to ashes."

"Weird," he says. With the corner of my eye, I catch him giving me a side-ways glance, the look in his eyes intense and piercing. "Is it because of the story you like it? The statue, I mean?"

My heart starting to pound, I force myself to look away and fix my eyes on the statue. "I don't know. I just do. It was donated to the school by my family, back in the nineteenth century."

"Ah," I hear him say, dropping his voice, "the family with a capital F. How come it's tucked away like this?"

“It’s a bit tacky so everyone seems to hate it,” I start, doing my best to ignore the fact he seems to be looking at *me*, not the statue, “starting with the Duchess who first received it as a gift from her mother-in-law. Maybe that’s part of the reason I have a soft spot for it.”

“Meaning?” comes a whisper that makes my skin flush.

I turn to look at him, finding him staring at me with soft yet intense eyes. “If you want to achieve anything of significance,” I say, “you can’t worry about being liked.”

“Mm,” he hums, the sound making me lose my breath. His eyes dart to my lips and then back up to my eyes. “Makes me wonder, what you plan on achieving,” he says in a whisper.

“Mm.” That’s all I say. That’s all I *can* say as I struggle to keep my breathing even and my eyes from roaming all over his face, his jawline, his lips.

He blows out a soft laugh, raising his eyebrows. “It was an actual question,” he says, making me snap out of it.

“It would sound ridiculous.” I turn away from him and move to keep walking down the hall, exhaling a suppressed breath.

He darts around me, blocking my way. “All the best things do,” he says with a soft, encouraging smile.

I just look at him for a second. Then I roll my eyes, I let out a little laugh and I say, “I want to change the world.” When I see his eyebrows shoot up, I rush to add, “A small part of it at least.”

And I keep standing there, my breath bated as I wait for his reaction.

Without taking his eyes off me, he smiles and says, “I have a feeling you just might.”

And for one long moment, he keeps staring into my eyes and I keep staring into his.

Until it finally hits me, that we’re just fucking standing there, staring at each other, and I snap out of it, suddenly and painfully.

“Well,” I start, forcing myself to break the silence, “we make a good team, Max and I.”

There’s a flash of a frown in his eyes at the mention of my fiance’s name. He doesn’t like him. Unsurprisingly, considering how their last interaction went. “I know Max can seem…” I don’t finish the sentence. I blow out an awkward laugh instead.

Howe's eyes narrow, his silence coupled with the piercing stare making me feel so self-conscious. "Yeah?" he finally asks.

"I know he can seem arrogant and whatnot, but he's actually the best Prince we have right now. *Also*, he and I, we won't be like all the other royal couples."

"No?" he asks, softly but seriously.

"No," I insist. "Unlike the other Princes, he's marrying for love. He believes in me. He even bet on me staying in the Games until the end."

Why do I feel like I'm explaining myself to him?

And then, instead of commenting on what I've just said, he just clears his throat, turns on his heel and throws me a look over his shoulder. "We'll be late, won't we?"

"Yeah," I blurt out, blushing as I rush to catch up with him.

He's picked up the pace, I notice. And soon, he's moving to turn another corner.

"Nope," I say, making him stop and turn to me. "Not that way." I point at a service elevator to my right. "This way."

We wait for the elevator and we ride in it, all in utter silence. I feel an urge to glance at him, to see if I've somehow made him mad. I resist it. I just let the elevator take us straight into the noisy, buzzing kitchens with exposed brick walls and polished brass cooking stations.

But once we step out, I fail to stop myself from looking over my shoulder, where he's standing, dumbfounded, probably over the sheer size of the place.

"Fucking hell," I see him say, or at least that's what I think it was. I can barely hear him over all the clatter of utensils, simmering of water and shouts from one end of the room to the other, but it makes my lips curl into a smile.

"What?" I ask, having to raise my voice a little. "You thought the Winter Solstice Ball happens at the flick of a wand?"

He rolls his eyes at me, making me swallow a laugh.

I turn back and start marching between the cooking stations, my eyes drawn — as always — to the staff's magic making wooden spoons stir, the spice jars season and the pancakes flip all on their own, no hands in sight.

I sense him catch up with me, asking, "Are we even allowed here?"

"Lady Romanov," Brighid — one of my favorite sous chefs — calls out from one of the work stations to our left, throwing me a beaming smile as

she motions at the pot in front of her.

I walk over to take a spoon and give it a taste. “Now how am I supposed to think about anything else for the rest of the day?” I ask her as I give the spoon back. Judging by the grin, she’s more than pleased by the reaction.

I turn to Howe. “What’re you waiting for? Or are you too posh to eat out of a pot?”

Shooting me a nasty look, he takes his own spoon and gives it a try. “Wow,” he says to Brighid, his mouth cracking into a grin, “makes me think I’ve never tasted real food before.”

Brighid lets out a little chuckle, throwing me the subtlest look telling me he’s charmed her, but it’s at that moment that I hear the Elevator open from the other side of the kitchen.

Fuck, the Game. I motion for Howe to follow me, we say bye to Brighid and start walking away.

I pick up the pace once I glance at my watch and see we’ve only got a couple of minutes left. We cross the room as quickly as possible.

“So, *Lady Romanov*,” Howe says as we jump into the Elevator just as a group of cooks step out of it, “do you spend a lot of your time in the kitchens?”

“Of course,” I reply, making my tone as sarcastic as possible. “One needs to keep the commoners appeased, don’t you think?”

“What?” I ask, frowning, when he squints at me funny.

But he doesn’t say anything, he just keeps smiling like an idiot.

The elevator door opens, snapping me out of it and making me get a move on. I dart out, hearing the contraption disappear back into the ground. Instantly, sudden noise drowns out my very thoughts and makes me stop midstep, sensing Howe do the same. There's Lycan Forest to my left and Graf Hill to my right, but they both have bleachers set up along them, every seat already taken. On the far side, in the direction of the castle, there's the booth with the Pied Piper and the Archon, the Guardian of the Obscura's chair placed below.

And almost right in front of us, there’s the podium with all the players waiting for the start of the Game in somber silence, their backs turned to us.

I turn my focus back onto the bleachers, from which the crowd is making the hellish noise. But why are they so high?

I sense Howe come to stand closer to me. “Finally, the rematch,” he says.

I turn to look at him only to find him grinning once again.

“You’re an idiot, you know?”

He tilts his head, squinting at me with soft eyes. “You’ve finally figured it out.”

I throw him a smirk. “I don’t know if I have. But I *do* know I’m about to leave you biting the dust.”

“You wish…” And he breaks off, as if stopping himself from finishing the sentence.

I roll my eyes at him as soon as it hits me. “Go on, fucking *say* it,” I tell him with an annoyed smile.

His eyebrows shoot up, but he doesn’t hesitate. ”You wish,” he repeats, leaning in a little with this spark in his narrowed eyes, “*Your Highness*.”

It almost makes me laugh out loud. But the very next moment, my self-consciousness kicks in when my eyes dart ahead and I notice all the eyes on us.

All the players, craning their necks to stare at us, including Nikolay.

And Max.

I sense Howe tense up beside me, just before Max disappears from the platform and appears right in front of us, throwing daggers at him.

“Isn’t her work here done?” he demands, his eyes darting from me back onto him. “Or do you need her to *fight* for you as well?”

My heart pounds in my chest and I throw a quick glance at the alpha standing beside me.

I notice him grit his teeth, but when he speaks, it’s in a low, controlled voice. “Can’t imagine anyone who wouldn’t want her on their team.” He pauses, squinting at my fiance with this weird, slightly menacing smile on his lips. “But you’re right, I best leave you to it.”

And he throws me a quick glance and walks away, heading straight for the other players. I don’t say anything, I just watch him deftly jump onto the platform and disappear into the crowd.

“You know, Anastasya,” Max says in a low voice, making me turn to look at him, “I’d expect something like this from your moron brother, but *you*?”

The tone — the *accusing* tone — instantly makes my eyebrows pull down. “What are you talking about?” I ask, softly.

“*Straight to the Game*, remember?” he snaps at me. “You think it was for no fucking reason we agreed on it?”

“That’s exactly what I was trying to do,” I insist, starting to feel pissed now because it was *his* fucking wishes I tried to respect when I decided we

wouldn't be waiting for the Elevator.

He throws me an incredulous look. "And *this* is how you chose to do it?"

"*This*? I don't understand what the problem is, Max," I urge him as I take a step closer, reaching out my hand to touch him.

He slaps my hand away. "You don't see a problem with you letting yourself be seen barging out of the kitchen entrance with the likes of him, grinning like some half-wit?"

"*The likes of him*? What're you on about? His friend was set free," I protest, thinking Max is referring to Professor Onas' murder. "And he himself never did anything wrong, so—"

Max waves a hand in impatient dismissal, stopping to angrily stare into my eyes. "You know what people are saying about him and women?"

The question makes blood rush to my cheeks.

But Max doesn't wait for an answer. "He's not the type of guy a future princess should be seen being anything more than polite with. Do you really need that explained to you?"

I just blink at him, feeling so stupid all of a sudden. "I guess you're right."

He just looks at me for a second, exhaling slowly. Then he laughs, wraps his arm around my waist and says, "I'm sorry for snapping like that, cupcake. I was just worried."

I let out a pent-up breath and snuggle up tighter against him.

"It'll be fine," he urges as he gives me a little squeeze. "From now on, *I'll* be the one making sure Nikolay is doing his duty, and you won't even have to see the guy except at the Games."

It makes me frown, but he doesn't wait for a reaction. He just pulls away and starts leading me onto the platform, my eyes sweeping over the players in an attempt to spot Howe, feeling this resistance in me to never seeing him again.

And all of a sudden, I realize we have a problem, Max and I. I have a fiance I'll be marrying in less than half a year and, despite all my attempts at denying it, I'm finding myself attracted to someone else.

But it's not Howe that's the problem, I think as I fix my eyes on Max walking in front of me. I guess I'm not as happy with things as I thought I was. And the only course of action I'll be able to live with is confronting my fiance about it right after the Game.

But as soon as we step onto the platform and I stand on the tips of my toes to try to look over the other players, I see Uncle getting out of his chair and I hear his voice boom from everywhere around me.

“It seems that we finally have all our players,” he says, almost instantly making the noise from the crowd die down. “So it’s time to let our Second Game begin.”

I watch the Pied Pier and the Archon shake hands, making the Box glow. Then Uncle opens it, takes Hourglass out and flings it into the air.

The crowd cheers just as a row of three huge stone circles appears between us and the spot where Uncle is standing. I feel my focus sharpen and my muscles start to itch with the need to blow off steam.

Chapter 14 - Dahrian

Almost as soon as that bony, pompous Schwarz takes his seat again, a set of stairs appears, leading from the platform and straight onto the first of the three stone circles. I let the crowd of sixty three other players swallow and start carrying me down, but my hands are balled into fists and my mind is somewhere else entirely.

It's still on *him*. The asshole prince. I can't seem to shake it off, the urge to bash his head in with just my fists.

Here's your chance, my fox sounds from the depths of my consciousness. *Kill him in the Ring and be done with it.*

"Sure," I drawl as I follow the other players onto the circle. "Seems like an appropriate response."

It's not me *who wants it. I couldn't care less about that excuse for a man,* he protests. Then he turns pensive. *Though, if you killed him, it* would *clear the way to the girl.*

Coming to stand near the center of the circle, I tell him in a threatening voice, "Stop it with the girl. I'm not letting you anywhere near her."

He lets out a low, menacing chuckle. *You're about to start fighting. I think you'll* let *me anywhere I want.*

"Then I guess I'll have to do this without shifting," I snarl at him.

I don't catch his reaction. The moment I tell him is the moment Hourglass flips and the sand starts running. The rest of the players get off the stairs,

the ground underneath us starts cracking, and the stone circles shoot up into the sky, making the crowd let out an audible gasp, and me and the others around me struggle to keep our balance.

Then everything goes still and quiet again.

Planting my feet firmly, I glance around, only to realize we're so high up in the air, I can't see the ground from where I'm standing. There's only the top of Graf Hill to my right and the Lycan Forest to my left, the bleachers set up along them.

I hear a murmur from the audience as the circle on which we're standing gets enveloped in a mist that makes it hard to see even the player standing right in front of me.

And the next second, when it dissipates, I see a veritable jungle has appeared all around us. There's a moment of silence as we all stand there, taking it all in. There are strange sounds coming from all directions, the movement of the giant, succulent leaves in the wind, the swaying of the thick vines hanging from the trees, the soft clicking of something from the shadows.

It's only when I see a vampire guy to my left tense up that my eyes dart in its direction. There's a crocodile on thick spider legs making its way down one of the trees.

My breathing goes shallow as I watch its movements, suddenly aware of a whole host of them observing us from both the trees and the ground as they slowly close the distance.

I sense some of the players get a move on and my eyes dart to my right, spotting a weapons rack they're moving towards. Normally, as a shifter, a weapon would only slow me down…

I take a second to assess my fox's state. It's 'the girl' he has his focus on, standing behind us but close enough for him to catch her scent. And I know he's not doing it because he's stupid or reckless. He's seen the croc spiders and decided they're nothing to worry about.

But *he* is, I think to myself. He's been behaving so strange lately and I can't be sure he wouldn't do something stupid.

So I dart over to the weapons rack, keeping one eye fixed on the creatures lurking from the shadows, moving as if they're trying to slowly encircle us. If at all possible, I intend on staying the fuck away from them so I reach for something long range. A javelin.

A javelin that gets snatched from me by none other than the asshole prince. For a second, he keeps standing there, the weapon in his hand and a smirk on his face. Then he zaps himself away, leaving me struggling not to start after him so I can break his fucking neck.

Fucking asshole, I think as I throw daggers after him. But I've no time to lose, so I pick the next best thing, a chainshot with two heavy metal balls connected by a thick chain. I wrap it around my fist and I follow the other players, who are already taking their positions, getting ready to start moving to the other side of the circle.

There's a moment of silence during which I throw a glance around me, spotting Romanov standing all the way to the left, preparing to move. I frown.

No weapons? She took nothing?

But it's at that very moment that one of the players, a short fae-blooded guy, starts charging through the jungle with a loud battle cry.

The next thing I know, a croc spider is kicking its legs off a tree and slamming into the poor bastard.

He thrashes. I watch the legs wrap around him and the crocodile jaw snap open only to close once it's around his shoulder.

The sound is sickening, making the fae let out a scream that penetrates deep into the bones.

Once it dies down, the Box zaps him out, the rest of the players, as well as the audience, still in shock.

Then we start moving again. And just like that, there's nothing but the Game on my mind.

*

Panting, I plant my feet firmly on the ground, zero in on another one and swing my arm back, catapulting the chainshot out of my grip.

It whips at the air as it goes, but it hits the target, wrapping itself around the croc spiders mouth and making it come crashing off the tree.

Another one, I think as I glance over my shoulder to see the ground strewn with their corpses, my lips curling into a smile.

But this is no time for gloating. The other side of the first circle is fast approaching and I might only have to kill a couple more to get to it. So I snap out of it, fix my eyes back ahead and keep moving.

It makes me stop midstep, when my fox starts sniffing like crazy.

My eyes snap to my left and I see her jump down from a tree and push herself up, that knife she cut the apples with in her hand and a pile of bloodied croc spider corpses around her.

She notices me watching and for a second, our eyes meet.

My fox thrashes inside me and I almost give in, but the next moment, she's tearing her eyes away from mine and darting ahead.

It makes me snap out of it. *I* want to be the first to finish the first round. I dart after her, taking one more croc spider down before the edge of the circle draws closer.

I see her leap over the chasm and deftly land on the second circle.

I come to a screeching halt, observing what kind of terrain the currently empty stone surface will birth.

My eyebrows shoot up when I see cliffs burst out, so pointy, they look downright deadly.

Where the creatures are — since this is obviously some kind of monster hunt — that I still do not know.

But I don't plan on standing here, waiting for them to appear. So, as I watch Romanov jump from one pointy tip to the other, I make a run for it.

I leap over the chasm and I land on the other side, sensing a couple of players following me.

And it's just as one of them, a Grimm shifter, whizzes past me, I spot the first one break off from the cliff.

I stand straight, my eyes zeroing in. It's a large bird the color of the stone around us, imitating the shade and the texture so well, it almost serves like an invisibility cloak.

I find temporary shelter behind one of the cliff walls, peering out. My eyebrows pull down as I watch the bird do a slow circle in the direction of the shifter. Why is he just standing there, waiting for it to attack?

No, I think as I zoom in on him. His eyes are fixed on the bird, one hand raised to shield himself from the sun. He looks as if he's here sightseeing, not fucking fighting. Add to that the fact that he seems to be smiling…

Sure, it's just a bird, I think to myself, but cockiness will only get you killed.

And just as I think that, I spot the guy freeze and my eyes dart back to the bird and I see it's not a regular bird after all.

I see it once it opens its mouth. *Mouth*, not beak. My muscles tensing up, I only have time to notice the bat head before the mouth starts releasing a

sickening ringing sound, so loud and high-pitched at the same time, it disorients me completely.

Once the call dies down and I manage to snap out of it, I see the guy stumbling on his feet as the bat bird propels itself towards him. I spot a flash of teeth shooting up from the lower jaw and the next thing I know, the guy is being impaled and lifted high above the ground. Blood curdles in my veins. He's screaming and he's frantically tapping his shirt with his hand.

Tapping *out*, I think to myself. And just as I do, the bat bird disappears and the Box zaps him out of the Ring.

I glance left and right, seeing other players looking just as tense from their hiding spots. I'm sure we're all thinking the same. This one might be a bit trickier than the last.

*

It's a moment too late that I notice one of them flying straight at me. I'm near the center of the circle, where the cliffs are denser, but I don't have time to dart into hiding.

The bat bird is already opening its mouth and if I let it screech, I'll be left paralyzed for at least a couple of seconds.

So I stand straighter, I aim, I fling the chainshot and I watch it wrap itself around the creature's neck.

My heart thudding in my chest, I wait for the sound, but there's only silence.

My muscles relax a bit before I notice it spread its wings and start spinning around, untangling the chainshot until it's sent flying through the air.

When I see it come straight at me, I duck, gluing myself to the ground. And that leaves me with no weapon, but as I stare into the cold, hard stone beneath me, I think I'm lucky I survived. And judging by the sounds of fighting all around me, most of the other students are still way back, me, Romanov and her asshole prince at the front.

Of course, that doesn't mean I don't have to try harder.

So I don't give my aching muscles even a minute of rest. I push myself off the ground and I keep moving.

I kill another one.

And another one.

Then a third one attacks.

I fight it off, slamming the chainshot so hard into its neck, it gets sent flying back, fails to produce any sound and disappears out of my line of sight. I hear sounds of struggle from my left and I freeze. It's her, my fox sniffing wildly in her direction, urging me to go there.

It's the very next second that I feel something slam into me, a pang of nauseating pain shooting through my ribs on the right side. The next thing I know, I'm being pushed backwards, one of that same creature's teeth threatening to impale me.

I lift the chainshot and I fling it down, the hard metal ball crashing into the bat bird's head, cracking its skull.

It slides off me and straight to the ground.

It hurts like fucking hell, I think as I press my palm onto my ribs, my mind immediately rushing back to those sounds I heard.

And as soon as I walk around one of the cliff walls, I see her. She's getting surrounded by three of them, they're about to paralyze her with their song and there's no knife in her hand. She must've lost it somewhere.

I grit my teeth, my mind buzzing.

But just as I'm about to charge straight at her and the creatures surrounding her are about to open their mouths, her eyes narrow, she lifts her hand up and I hear this whizzing sound from somewhere to my left.

The next thing I know, she has her knife in her hand and the knife is glowing.

Within the next five seconds, all the bat birds are falling to the ground, lifeless, their throats cut and blood spurting out of the gashes.

Fucking hell, I think as heat starts washing over me.

It snaps me out of it, when I sense someone else watching. My eyes dart to my left, where I see her brother, my buddy Nikolay, observe her in silence, his eyebrows pulling down.

But the next second, someone slams into me, I double back and I see the asshole prince whiz past me, throwing me a look filled with contempt.

Fucking dick, I think to myself.

But when I turn my focus back onto her, she's gone. And so is her fiance. And I sure as hell won't let myself be the last to escape this hell hole of a circle.

*

It's almost at the same time that Romanov, the asshole prince and I reach the edge of the second circle.

They leap and I leap after them.

Once we come crashing to the ground on the other side, for a second, there's only silence.

Then the stone beneath our feet starts giving way to sand. Silky, fine sand. The whole of the circle fills up with it, but then everything stops and there's only the breeze upsetting some of the more surface grains.

The two of them are standing not too far ahead of me. I see them hesitate, throwing each other a loaded glance.

She throws one over her shoulder as well, at me, and for a split second, our eyes meet.

Then her fiance moves. I think for a second, but I don't follow suit, despite the finish line being clearly visible from where I'm standing. And neither does she, though her hand is hovering above her holster. We seem to be employing the same strategy. Wait until the creatures appear.

For a second, I just watch the asshole prince use his stealth to practically glide over the sand. Fucker, I think as I ball my hands into fists.

But the very next second, I see him double back, practically jumping up into the air, when the sand beneath him shifts, rising higher above the ground as if it's coming alive. For a moment, he struggles to keep his balance, but then the sand lowers him back onto the ground.

I see him throw an amused look at Romanov.

Right before he throws *me* a smirk, making my blood start to boil.

Then he turns back ahead, grips his javelin tighter and starts charging through the desert all around us, straight for the finish line.

All my muscles tense up. And just as I hear other players joining us, their shoes hitting the sand behind me, a giant snake bursts out of the sand, coils itself high up in the air and comes charging down like an arrow, straight at the asshole prince. It's got the head of a scorpio.

For a second, my heart thundering in my ears is the only sound I can hear.

But then it begins. Chaos.

All of a sudden, there are students screaming as that same snake keeps bursting out of the sand, dealing cuts with its giant pincers. Blood curdles in my veins when I see how thick yet sharp they are.

The next second, I feel the sand beneath me shift and I find myself leaping up and doing a flip, throwing myself onto the ground and rolling as far away as possible.

Once I push myself up, panting, I see one of the students with his arm cut off in a single, clean swing, but the skin above it already turning poison green. The next second, he gets zapped out of the Game.

Holy shit, I think to myself as I quickly scan my surroundings in search of a hiding spot.

There is none.

But time is definitely not on my side, I decide as I watch the beast shoot up again at the same time as yet another student being taken away. So I take a deep breath and I start running, zigzagging in an effort to make myself a tougher target.

And I do manage to put some distance between myself and the start of the circle, but I'm not as fast as I'd like. I keep having to stop, jump up into the air to avoid the scorpion snake. And then there are the sounds, the sounds of panic, screaming, flesh being torn out.

Just as I'm about to reach the center of the circle, I watch Romanov appear out of thin air before me, falling on her ass, but not wasting any time. Just as the beast comes to hover above her, she raises the hand with the knife, flings it and watches it puncture the beast's neck, making it hiss with pain.

To my surprise, she looks in my direction, locking eyes with mine. And she throws me a sly little smile that I know means she thinks she'll win. She'll get to the finish line faster.

I hesitate, but I start walking around her and the beast, all my muscles tense and ready to attack as I keep moving, gaining advantage.

As the scorpio snake prepares to attack, I see Romanov try to get her knife back, but it's stopped glowing. No magic left.

And the beast is leaning forward, starting to charge straight at her.

Against all reason, I stop. I sense someone else do the same, the asshole prince coming to stop somewhere to my right.

Then, the next second, Romanov disappears and my eyes start darting left right in search of her.

But it's at the beast's neck that I spot her next, pulling her knife out and jumping back down, her boots making a cloud of sand rise up when they hit the ground.

Without hesitation, without mercy, she swings her knife at her wrist and cuts, deep, making dark red blood gush out.

With the corner of my eye, I catch her fiance take a step forward, his fist clenched.

But then her knife starts glowing and she throws it, again, then calls it to her, jumps high up to catch it and while still in the air, throws it once again.

She does it, over and over again, so fast and hitting the neck with such precision, it doesn't take her long to make the beast start swaying. It sways and it sways and then it comes crashing to the ground, splattering panting Romanov with her sticky blood.

I don't have time to process what's going on because I see her turn on her heel, weak in the knees but with such a determined look on her face. And she starts walking towards the finish line, towards *me*, and I catch her eye and she's all bloodied and the look in her eye is so ruthless, it makes my blood rush around and my fox start clawing to be let out.

Her eyes don't linger on mine. I see her fight off the shaking of her knees and start to sprint for the finish line, leaving me standing there, my heart pounding in my chest and my head all jumbled up.

The next thing I know, she's jumping down, down onto the field, the scoreboard letting out that loud yet high-pitched sound marking her finishing the Game.

And then, still in some kind of trance, I feel the need to look to my left and I see the scorpio snake coming back to life.

My muscles tense up again. Of course, there are still a lot of players in the Game, I think as my eyes sweep over the desert. We need a monster to fight, right?

I ball my hands into fists. I may have let myself get a little distracted, but now that *she's* gone…

As I watch the beast dive under the sand again, watching its movement under its silky surface like a hawk, I finally let my fox through.

And he charges out of me, hitting the ground running, his enormous, strong body making it possible for me to leap up, keep myself up there until the beast comes shooting out, then grab it by the neck and snap it while still in the air.

I jump down, the corpse falling behind me. And I'm panting, but my fox is enjoying the smell of blood filling his nose and the rush of adrenaline from the kill.

I don't hesitate. I start charging straight for the finish line, almost reaching it when I remember who's waiting down below.

Quickly, while already in the air, I shift back and I jump down, anxious despite the win. Because it's not the Games that are on my mind.

*

As soon as I land, I have to start fighting off all the people crowding me, wanting to congratulate me, needing me to explain to them what exactly happened at this or that point in the Game.

It's only when I politely wave them off that I realize I've found myself in a large fenced-out resting spot, with benches all along its edges.

When the last of the eager students disperse and I look around, my fox starts sniffing once again. She's here, but I can't see her. And there's this overwhelming urge to go to her and I give in, following the trail of her scent.

It gets me wandering around, avoiding all the staff offering refreshments and medics asking if I need something fixed.

Then, as soon as I turn back to the Ring, I spot her. The two of them, that is, her and the asshole prince, standing beside one of the benches. Standing there, looking all tense.

She's upset, my fox growls. *I can sense it.*

I try to stop myself, but I'm covered in all this blood, which means she won't be able to sniff me out, and she's shaking her head as she looks everywhere but at him, which doesn't sit right with me. I should at least make sure she's okay, right?

I come a little closer, hearing the asshole prince demand, "Well?"

"*Well*," she replies through gritted teeth, "what reason do the rest of them have?"

He lets out a frustrated scoff. "The rest of them are *men*, Anastasya, for crying out loud," he says, making my eyebrows pull down.

"Not all of them are," she snaps back.

"Zelda and Annika?" he spits out. "You mean Zelda and Annika? You know why they do it?" He gets even more in her face, making her look away again and making *me* start to fume. "Their families don't care about them, that's why they let them do stupid fucking shit like that."

She stays silent for a second, jaw clenched. Then she looks straight into his eyes. "It's *my* power."

"Well, it's not suitable for a princess," he snaps. "I mean, Anastasya…" He starts shaking his head, gesturing at the arms folded at her chest. "Look at this. You've fucking ruined yourself."

And with that, he turns to walk away, but before I do the same, I catch her wrap her arms tighter around herself, grimacing in an attempt not to start crying.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I find myself moving towards her. Then some Grimm almost knocks into me, making me snap out of it.

Luckily, neither Romanov nor the asshole prince spot me. I turn around and walk away, my entire body vibrating with rage as I make my way out of the resting spot and back to the camp. I have to get away as quickly as possible, I think as I feel my fox trying to break himself free.

Angry, we're both so angry, we could snap his neck without so much as a second of hesitation. And that's not good.

Chapter 15 - Nyx

I rush into the Elevator, my mind buzzing and my hands balling into fists. I can barely breathe, that's how pissed and disoriented I feel. Luckily, there's no one here with me. They're all still out there, busying themselves by singing each other's praises, especially the Grimms, who are currently in the lead, the result being twenty two to only ten.

I try to focus on it myself. After all, I did make it. The Second Game is done and I'll be in the third one as well. But no matter what I do, my mind refuses to linger on the achievement. All it wants is to keep feeling the fresh cuts on my forearm as it conjures up images of my fiance grabbing it.

The Elevator spits me out into the House of Lilith Common Room and I move to cross it, and still, I barely register my surroundings.

It's for that reason that I almost trip when someone appears to block my way.

"For fuck's sake, Nikolay," I say as I grab my chest with both my hands, struggling to stop my heart from pounding.

My brother just keeps standing in front of me with a serious look on his face. More serious than, well, ever, at least since Father died. "Next time," he says in a flat but tense voice, "you need to tap out."

I just blink at him for a second. "Tap out?" I frown. "What're you talking about?"

"Tap out of the Game."

I take a deep breath to steady myself. "*That* I understood. *What for*, that's the question."

Gritting his teeth, he gets in my face, making me take a step back with a growing frown. "You're ruining things, Nyx," he whispers, "can't you see that?"

"Ruining things?" I echo, feeling more tired by the second. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't the point of the Games to stay until the end?"

"You're being vulgar," he insists in a voice filled to the brim with contempt. "It's *vulgar*, the way you're acting out there."

For a second, I just look at him, finally realizing this is about my Blood Magic. And the very thought of getting into it right now, it makes me bone tired and desolate. "Please, Nikolay," I insist in a low, weak voice, "I can't do this right now."

And I move to push past him.

He comes to block my way, his frown having grown deeper. "I don't care," he hisses at me, raising a clenched fist to his stomach without taking his eyes off me. "I never should've let you hang out with that asshole. Those shifters, they're all bloody lowlifes."

Normally, I'd just roll my eyes at him. Now, all I want to do is cry. "Yeah, whatever," I say and I move to push past him, again.

And *again*, he blocks my way, this time taking my upper arm into his grip. "There are people out there watching these games," he starts through gritted teeth, "*important* people. We're trying to sell the land to them and you're behaving like a fucking madwoman right in front of their eyes."

I barely register what he calls me. "The land?" I demand. "You're trying to sell my land?"

"*Our* land, Nyx," he reminds me.

Well, technically, it's not, I think to myself. Father left it to me and me only. But I don't say anything.

I just break my arm free, my heart cracking in my chest, and I run out of the Common Room. I hear him call after me, but I don't even turn around.

*

I close the door behind me, my mind buzzing and my muscles clenched. The silence and the privacy of the portrait room is so complete, so welcoming, at first it feels downright odd.

But no one's ever found me here. And no one ever will.

I let my body slide down to the floor and I fix my eyes on Lady X. It brings a certain relief, seeing her looking the same as always, observing me from the soft shadows of her picture-perfect, secluded garden.

But the relief is short lived. The shock, the anger, the deep, deep sadness, they all come rushing back up to the surface, making me hug my legs and lay my forehead on my knees in search of comfort in darkness.

Forget, I tell myself, just forget.

But the images of the look in Max's eyes refuse to desert me, and so does the ghostly grip of his hand on my aching wrist.

"You've fucking ruined yourself."

The words dig into me and they burn and they burn, clawing themselves deeper and deeper, until all I can do to stop myself from reaching for my knife is bite my lip until it bleeds.

Serves me right, I guess. And as soon as I think that, it's as if the sadness dissipates and I look up and I fix my eyes on Lady X again, a joyless, desperate smile on my lips.

"Serves me right to think I can drop the act for even a second, right?" I ask her.

No reply. Just that meek, subservient look in her eyes.

It makes me start to fume, my breathing becoming heavier as I keep staring at her, more intently by the second.

"I know, yeah," I tell her, bitterness lacing my every word, "you would've done it so much better than I did. If they'd even let you participate in the Games. You would've gasped and asked for assistance, been the perfect damsel in distress, right? And afterwards, your fiance would beam at you, telling you how proud you've made him. And then you'd ride off into the sunset with him, yeah?" I pause, breathing heavily. "Or would you?"

No reply.

"Tell me what you'd do," I insist through gritted teeth.

Still, nothing.

"What about the land?" I demand as I spring onto my feet. "What would you do about the land that your father left you? Would you just keep going, changing from morning to evening dress as they take away piece by piece of your heart? You would, wouldn't you? Just like they all did, just like they all do, turning blind eyes to much worse than that, wining and dining with children dying outside their gilded gates, am I right, Lady X?"

For a second, I think I've caught a glimpse of something in her eyes.

But she just keeps looking at me, all docile and smiling.

"Am I fucking right, you stupid fucking bitch?" I demand as I take a step closer and I slam a fist into her face, as if she's a living and breathing being, as if *she's* the enemy.

Once again, no reply. I let my fist slide down the painting, my teeth gritted.

"*Our* land, Nyx," I hear my brother's voice in my head.

Well, it's *his* land, I snap back. It's *Father's* land you're trying to sell.

And it's the last fucking thing I want to do right now, I think as I stand straighter, determination flooding my body.

But I'm going to go get dressed for the Ball, I'm going to find my fiance and I'm going to tell him the deal is off.

*

I fasten the little silver clasps and tighten the little black-leather ribbons. Once I'm finished, I come to stand in front of my bedroom mirror, seeing my lips pressed tight and my eyebrows pulled down. It's an elaborate, beautiful dress, the sleeveless bodice tailored to look like soft, chic armor and from it, a waterfall of black satin flowing onto the floor, almost entirely covering my black, block-heel boots. Deserving of a future princess. I just don't feel like one.

And I'm not supposed to feel like one, not now that I'm on a mission, I remind myself.

But just as I turn on my heel to grab the metal-studded clutch off my bed, I hear a knock at the door, my muscles immediately tensing up.

I smell him even before he opens the door, softly, slowly.

Max, a bouquet of black roses in his hands.

My gut twists and my muscles stiffen as I watch him approach with a tentative smile on his lips, his eyebrows raised in apology.

"I'll be frank, cupcake," he says as he comes to stand an arm-length away, watching my reaction. "I'm here to grovel. Whatever you need to forgive me for the way I behaved today, you'll get."

And he takes a step closer, holding the bouquet out for me, but it only makes me take one back, leaving him frozen where he found himself.

Why, I think as I look at him. *Why* did he have to do it?

I swallow around a lump in my throat, deciding to stop hesitating. "I hear you're trying to sell my family's land."

There's a flash of surprise in his eyes. He stands straighter. At first, he just squints at me, but then the look in his eyes grows softer. "This is *not* the way I imagined breaking the news to you," he says as he takes a step closer.

I take one back. "You know what interests me?" I demand. "How is it that you didn't need the *owner* of the land to come to those secret meetings with you?"

"Come on, Anastasya," he says with a wave of his hand. "You always talk about how much you hate those kinds of things — the sales meetings, the dry conversations, the forced smiles."

"I don't care for courtrooms either," I reply flatly, "but if I had to come defend myself, I think I'd somehow manage to put that aside."

"These people," he insists, "they're not as open-minded as I am. It's men they want to do business with."

I look deeper into his eyes, trying to gauge whether he's being honest. It does seem like it, and I guess that's *something*, at least, I think to myself. But I just can't shake it off. "Well," I say, "I don't see a reason for *us* to do any kind of business with *them*."

He shakes his head, throwing me an incredulous look. "Anastasya, you're a smart girl. You *know* that, soon, there'll simply be no money to run it all."

Balling my hands into fists, I take a step closer. "I only have two years until I graduate," I snap through gritted teeth, "and the land was left to me by my father, not to sell, but to cherish and improve on."

"You don't think I took all of that into account?" he asks, making a bit of my anger die down. "It's why I'm negotiating a clause to keep you Head of Council," he says as he takes a step closer and takes my wrist in his hand. "The sale will only bring a cash injection, the rest will stay the same."

I don't pull my hand away, but I have to force myself to talk. "Look, Max," I start, albeit hesitantly, "I care about the land and what happens to it, *deeply*. But you're missing the point."

He tilts his head at me, squinting a little.

I stay silent for a moment. Before the Game, I'd decided to talk to him about what's going on with Howe. But all of a sudden, *that* seems the least of our problems. "I thought we'd be in this together," I finally squeeze out, feeling myself getting choked up.

"Of course we will," he rushes to say, dropping the bouquet to the floor to take me in his arms. "We *are*," he insists when I just keep standing there

like I got turned to stone. “And I thought I was doing a good thing with the land, but I promise, no more secrets like that.”

I throw him a squint, but I can’t relax, my mind flashing with images of him coming to tell me off before the Game. “Alright, I believe you,” I tell him as I tentatively put my arms around his shoulders.

And there’s this resistance in me, but I push through it and keep going. “But I thought you’d be giving me the respect I deserve as your future wife. I thought I told you you can’t just snap your fingers and expect me to jump through whatever fucking hoop you motion at.”

I watch his eyebrows pull down. “You talking about you being late for the Game today?”

I nod, however hesitantly.

“Anastasya, what exactly did I do, hm?” he asks as he pulls away, a frown creasing his forehead again. “You told me I can’t be ordering you around and I told you I’d respect that.”

The words send my mind buzzing.

“*And*?” he demands. “Was I ordering you around?”

For a second, I stay tongue tied. “No,” I finally say.

And I see him relax, but I fail to stop myself from insisting, still feeling the same kind of embarrassment he put me through the night Professor Onas got killed.

“But you did tell me *you’d* be taking care of it,” I tell him, gently, “and you did decide there’s someone I won’t be seeing anymore without even talking to me about it.”

I pause to look deeper into his eyes, to make that connection. “Don’t you understand we can’t do it like that? If we’re to be married, especially if we’re to be a ruling couple, we have to be in it *together*, but at the same time, you also have to let me deal with my own shit, *on my own*.”

“And when I see you’re not?” he protests, throwing his hands up in frustration. “I can’t even get involved? Is that what you’re asking of your future husband? To not care? Do you think that’s normal?”

For a second, his words render me speechless. “No, of course not,” I finally blurt out. And I still feel this resistance, but I’m no longer so sure of myself when I say, “But that’s not what I meant. That’s not the problem here.”

He just looks at me for a second. “Fine,” he then says, throwing me a warm smile as he comes to stand closer. “We’ll just pretend today didn’t

even happen. Would that fix it, cupcake?"

And he takes my wrist in his, raising his eyebrows at me.

For a second, I hesitate, wishing with all my heart I could just say yes.

But his fix doesn't change what hurts most of all, I think as my eyes dart to my wrist in his hand.

You've fucking ruined yourself.

Gritting my teeth, I try to break free.

He doesn't let me. He only tightens the grip, turning my palm up and looking down at the scars. I have to fight the need to squirm. "Hey," he asks as he looks up at me again, "you know I didn't mean any of that?"

"I don't," I say flatly, but not without hesitation.

"Well, I didn't," he leans to whisper in my ear. "You know I love you, cupcake. You're perfect just the way you are."

I wait for him to pull away. "Except for the scars."

He shakes his head. "That's nothing."

"You don't mean that," I say, a tinge of hopefulness in my voice.

"Oh yes, I do," he replies with a smile, looking deep into my eyes as he wraps his arms around me. "I just got so worried when I saw what you were doing today. You know how dangerous Blood Magic is. It takes a certain type of person to be able to handle it."

The words sting, but I dismiss them. And his voice is so tender and loving when he says, "And I just don't want you getting hurt with no fucking reason except showing off. You do understand that?"

For a second, I just stare into his eyes. And that resistance doesn't dissipate, not entirely, but I feel my own gaze soften as I nod. "Of course, Max," I say in a much gentler voice.

That seems to make him happy. He throws me a grin, lets go of me and claps his hands, looking deep into my eyes. "Now, won't you let me give you a present?" he asks as he rummages for something in his waistcoat pocket.

What he produces nearly blinds me. It's a pendant on a black silk strap, an elaborate aged-silver frame with a large diamond, the biggest I've ever seen.

"It was my grandmother's," he says as he walks around me to put it around my neck. "I thought it'd go with your eyes." He fastens it and comes to look at me with a smile. "And it does. It's a play of light and darkness."

Absent-mindedly, I walk up to the mirror and raise my fingers to the diamond, feeling its smooth, cold surface.

When I look at Max's reflection, I see his eyebrows shoot up and his smile grow bigger as he tilts his head, waiting for something.

"What do you say?" he finally asks.

The question snaps me out of it. "Thank you," I finally say as I throw him a wide smile, suddenly knowing exactly what to do to fix *everything*.

I turn around and I kiss him, passionately. And I slide my hand down his crotch, making him let out a groan and grab me by the waist. I tease him a little, before I turn around again, press my palms against the surface of the mirror and watch him eagerly unzipping his pants, lifting my dress up and getting inside me.

As soon as he does, I start touching myself, locking eyes with him in the mirror, determined to get him turned on by it instead of upset.

It doesn't work. I almost instantly see him frowning. He tries to pry my hand away, but I don't let him.

It's just that the look he's giving me is like a cold shower, so I get him out of me and I turn to face him, flustered and hurt, but desperate to make him understand me.

He's still frowning, but I put my arms around his shoulders and lean to whisper in his ear, "What? Don't you want it to be nice for me?"

"Nice for you?" he asks as he pulls away. "Isn't it nice for you already?"

"I just want us to be even closer, Max."

"*You're* the one refusing to give *me* the kiss, not the other way around."

"It's closeness first, then the kiss."

"And you have to use your fingers to feel closer to me? I'm not enough for you?"

The statement renders me speechless.

There's a second of silence.

Then, pulling away and throwing his hands up, he lets out an angry scoff. "Why can't you be like all the other women, Nyx?"

My mind buzzing and this shame flooding my entire being, I find myself unable to react in any way.

For a second, he just looks at me.

Then he comes to give me a hug. "Hey, it's fine, cupcake," he says.

And I don't push him away, but I don't snuggle up either, my mind buzzing.

“You’re still a little out of it. It’s that fucking Blood Magic messing with your brain.” He pauses to let out a frustrated breath, then gives me a warm smile. “But we’ll have the entire winter break, including the honeymoon, to pick up where we left off.” He gives me a little wink. “And you know I’ll be taking you someplace real nice, don’t you?”

“I do,” I say, trying not to sound too flat.

My mind still buzzing, I give him another kiss, on the cheek this time, and I move to finally get us out of my room and to the Ball.

But before I can even open the door, he appears next to me, his eyes darting to my wrist as he asks, “Won’t you be covering that up?”

For a second, I just blink at him. Then I rush to do as he says.

But as I let him lead me out of my room, through the Common Room and across the Entrance Hall, all in the direction of the music, there’s this coldness growing in the depths of my stomach.

And the sense of something different existing out there, calling out to me in a way that’ll be hard to resist.

Chapter 16 - Dahrian

"Dahrian," I hear Ricky's voice from my right, drowning out all the chatter and the music. I don't stop, but I turn my head to look at him just as we walk past the Brothers Grimm statue. He's squinting at me. "People are saying hi and you're not saying hi back."

"Right right," I rush to say, still feeling as if I'm waking from some kind of dream. "Thanks, Ricky."

The Entrance Hall is buzzing and now that I'm forcing myself to focus, I can see a lot of students trying to catch my eye as we walk. "Hi, how's it going?" I nod to one I think I've met before the First Game, out in some hallway when I was looking for a bathroom. Smiling from ear to ear, he nods back.

And it shouldn't come as a surprise, considering the amount of people here where there's no party, but once we step through the archway and into the Main Hall, the crowd still makes me stop midstep.

"Wow," I hear Ricky say.

It's all so luxuriously decorated, like some winter wonderland, so it's hard to keep focus on one thing at a time. Icicles hanging from the high vaulted ceilings, decorated pine trees at every corner, a large crystal podium to the front center.

What snaps me out of it is a plump fae girl coming to stand right in front of me, some unknown plea in her eyes as she scans my outfit. I frown,

tucking the bandage wrapped around my wrist deeper into the sleeve of my suit jacket.

"Would it be possible to get an autograph?" the girl asks. "I think your fox was out of this world."

I shake my head, slowly but with determination, as I grab a shot glass off some passing waiter's tray. "Thanks, but no." I have to force myself to give her a smile before I throw the shot back.

And she looks a little disappointed, but not like she really minds.

So when I move to keep walking and notice Ricky throwing me yet another funny look, it puzzles me. It even annoys me a little.

I take him straight to the bar to the left of the podium, all the while scanning the room for a certain dark-haired princess. I prop myself on my elbow and gesture for the bartender to give me a beer from the fridge behind his back.

And I turn to Ricky, who's just standing there, as if he's waiting for something, and I ask, "What?"

He winces a little as he approaches the bar, resting his forearms on it. "I just thought it was a little rude of you."

It takes me a second to understand what he's talking about. But as soon as I do, I let out a scoff. "Come on, mate, autographs?" I say as I take the beer out of the bartender's hand. I gulp it all down, I set the bottle down and I explain, "I'd feel like a fucking asshole. She should try her luck with the Prince of Assholes. I'm sure he'd be happy to give it to her."

Ricky frowns and opens his mouth to say something, but then it occurs to me and a flame ignites inside me. "Didn't you say you're keeping track of the bets?"

"I am."

"And didn't you say you saw the Prince of Assholes bet on himself?"

"I did."

He *believes* in her, she tells me. Lying bastard, I curse to myself, feeling my breathing becoming heavier as I grab and down another three shots off some wandering tray.

"What's the matter with you?" I hear Ricky say.

I fix my eyes back on him, frowning as he himself squints at me. "What's the matter with me?" I echo. "Why're you asking me that?"

And I can tell he's not indifferent to the tone of my voice, but he just looks at me for a second and then says, frankly and to the point, "You've

been off lately, especially today, and it's making me worried."

Now that gives me pause. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He's right, I think to myself. Throughout today's Game, how much time did I spend focusing on winning and how much time on watching *her* win?

So I let out a sigh, I lock eyes with my friend and I force myself to say, "I'm going to need a favor, Ricky."

"Of course," he says, shaking his head eagerly. "For you, anything."

"You know the future princess?"

His lips curl into a smile. "Yeah, turns out she's a Blood Magic user. What a nice twist, huh?"

"Right," I reply absent-mindedly. "Anyway… I'll need you to help me stay away from her."

"Stay away from her?" he asks with a frown. "What for?"

I hesitate for a second, but then I order another beer, I take a step closer to him, practically getting in his face, and I drop my voice a little. "I'll tell you, but you can't breathe a word of it to anyone, *ever*, got it?"

Ricky nods vigorously.

I down the beer, to brace for what's coming. I set the bottle down and I look straight into his eyes. "I can't seem to stop flirting with her," I tell him, as flatly as I can.

He laughs. Then, when I don't say anything, he frowns, leaning in a little but not taking his eyes off me. "The princess?" he practically hisses in an attempt to keep his voice down. "Are you out of your mind? She's engaged to the goddamn prince."

What would he say if I told him that just today, I found myself almost moving to fucking kiss her? I'd never hear the end of it.

I let out a sigh. "I don't care that he's the fucking prince, Ricky. I just care that she's engaged." I pause, not looking away even though I'd prefer to. "But whenever I find myself near her, no matter how hard I try, everything I say or do comes out flirty." I blow out a frustrated breath, squeezing the bottle in my hand. "It's like it's out of my fucking control."

My friend just squints at me for a second. "Are you… falling for her?"

I shake my head, vigorously. "*No*, no, I'm not," I insist. "It's my fox," I say as I dig a little inside, sniffing out his mood. Broody, which is very unusual after a battle won. "He's being weird about her and it's messing with my brain."

“That’s strange,” Ricky says under his breath, thinking. “What do you think could be the reason?”

“It’s beside the point,” I snap. “I told you why,” I tell him, raising a finger to make sure I’m heard, “but now I need you to set it aside and focus solely on keeping me away from her. Got it?”

He nods, and I’m pleased with how serious he looks about it. So I nod as well and for a second, I just keep standing there, propped up on the bar, avoiding the stares of the girls from the tables all around us. Now that they’ve seen my fox, they’ll be coming at me even more.

I hear Ricky talk to the bartender, trying to order this very particular brew and getting into all the details about it. But I’m busy trying to talk myself into it.

My mind is still flashing with the images of her covered in blood, that ruthless look in her eyes, and then that face she made when that asshole talked to her after the Game. And I can’t remember the last time I felt this unfocused, craving something without even knowing what.

But it’s the party after the Game and I’ve been neglecting my pack. So despite being in no fucking mood for socializing, I catch Ricky’s eye and I grab us both a beer. He excuses himself from his conversation with the obviously bored bartender and I motion for him to follow me.

“We’re going to show our boys and girls what it means to party,” I tell my friend and with the corner of my eye, I see excitement flashing through his eyes.

*

We’re on our second idiotic drinking game when my fox starts sniffing wildly once again. By the feeling in my gut, which is at the same time sinking and soaring, I know exactly what’s happened.

I look away from one of the O’Malley brothers trying to mime something to us and I fix my eyes on the archway, all the way on the other side of the huge hall. And there she is, stepping into the room with his arm wrapped around her waist. My fox snarls and I do the mental equivalent of kicking him with my boot.

I tear my eyes away, but my mind doesn’t follow. I haven’t seen her that dressed up since the day she showed me around the Academy. And it’s making my heart beat faster, thinking of the possibility of her eyes landing on me, even in passing.

So when a timid male voice booms from the speakers all around us, I immediately breathe a sigh of relief.

"If we could ask all our magnificent players to come up to the stage, please," the announcer says as I see the lights hit the podium and the music and the chatter die down a little.

Fuck. Not good after all. I glance around, praying I won't see her among the students approaching the podium. But I do.

"Come on," I hear Ricky's voice from my left. My head snaps to him and I see him nudging me to lead the way. "*You're* the alpha. Or have you quit?" he asks with a smile.

Sure feel like doing it right now, I think to myself. But I don't say that. With a smile, I get up, I motion for everyone else to follow me and I throw Ricky a side-eye glance. "Where'd you run off to? We had to make up the rules for some of the games along the way."

I see blood rush to his cheeks. "I don't kiss and tell," he says a little shyly.

I don't stop walking, but I don't take my eyes away from him either. My mouth cracking into a grin, I let out a low wolf whistle and I shove his shoulder with my fist. "Go, Ricky."

He throws me an annoyed smile, but that's where the interaction stops, because we reach the podium and start climbing. With the corner of my eye, I spot her picking the hem of her dress up off the floor, flashing the smooth white skin of her leg as she lifts it to climb. I imagine it wrapped around me, her eyes boring into me.

Get it the fuck together, I snap at myself.

Facing the crowd in front of the podium, we all line up in silence, the players throwing smiles at each other as they do. Her and I, we stay on the opposite sides of the row.

"Now that we have everyone here," the male voice continues, "we promise we won't keep you long. This is just to say it's been a wonderful journey so far and we still have thirty six of you to watch in the Third Game, which is to be held on February 1st, in a little more than a month. Isn't that amazing?"

The crowd cheers, some of the people throwing in a whistle here and there. The noise throbs in my head.

"And now, a word from your Guardian," the announcer says, struggling to be heard.

But when Ludwig Schwarz emerges from the crowd and starts climbing the stairs, everyone goes quiet.

Is he walking funny?

"Hello, everyone," he says in that low, raspy voice of his, as he gives us all a nod and turns to face the audience.

I watch him closely. I haven't had a chance since the murder and I know he was never accused, but it was also never proven that he's not guilty. Corruption, probably. After all, he *is* a member of the holy Romanov Dynasty.

"I'd like to take this opportunity to say how miserable I am to be here tonight," he starts, making my eyebrows immediately pull down.

I throw a glance at Ricky, who throws one back, also frowning. I hear a low murmur from everywhere around me.

But the Guardian of the Obscura continues as if nothing's happened. "This is a year that I won't forget for as long as I live. Especially now that I've been accused of murder."

What the… There's shifting in the audience, deep frowns, somber murmurs.

"I meant to say," Schwarz rushes to correct himself, "especially since I've been chosen to be the Guardian of the Obscura."

He lets out a nervous laugh. "I won't be giving some long-winded speech," he says. "All I really wanted to say is congratulations to all our players on making it to the Third Game. And may our guests hate it here so much that they leave as soon as possible."

Now, that creates chaos. All of a sudden, I see members of my pack stepping out of the row in which we're standing, their fists clenched as Schwarz tries to make himself heard over all the shouts coming from the audience.

Ricky by my side, I rush to step between him and the O'Malley brothers, who've gotten him surrounded.

"Don't, fellas," Schwarz pleads with them as they throw daggers at him, "this is some kind of mistake."

"Is it?" one of the O'Malley brothers demands.

"Stop it," I growl at them just as some of the other professors rush to the podium.

"Enough," a clear, authoritative voice booms from somewhere behind me.

Everyone stops. And I mean *everyone*.

My head snaps back and I see people letting the Pied Piper through. Exceptionally tall, intelligent-looking and scary, those are the words I'd use to describe her. Her black eyes sweep over all of us, making my skin prick, but she doesn't linger. She walks over to us, to Schwarz, making me and Ricky take a step back, the O'Malley brothers dispersing as if they were children caught eating cookies before dinner.

I strain both my eyes and my ears, so as not to miss a thing. She leans to whisper something in Schwarz's ear. When she pulls away, the expression on her face is unchanged. Indifferent yet determined. But *his* is the expression of a man helpless in his own anger.

My breath held, I watch him clear his throat and leave the podium, in utter silence and without giving any of us so much as a glance.

"What're you waiting for?" the Pied Piper asks, making me tear my eyes away from the seething professor. She's looking around the room, at people frozen in anticipation. "There's a lot of alcohol that needs to be consumed as quickly as possible," she says in a flat yet somehow playful voice. "I suggest you get on it."

I think it's the tone of her voice, if not her entire presence that makes the crowd around me relax.

The very next moment, the Pied Piper is taking her leave while everyone else is picking up where they left off.

I notice the other players start to disperse and my eyes land on Romanov, who's about to go down the stairs with her fiance with a serious look on her face. For a second, our eyes meet and she hesitates, but she throws me a half-smile.

I throw one back and try to force myself to tear my eyes away from her before it becomes weird.

"Hey," I hear Ricky say and I turn to look at him.

His eyes are narrowed, darting from me to her.

I blow out a joyless laugh. "Good man," I say as I pat him on the back. "Up for one more drink?" I ask, eager to drown my sorrows.

Ricky gives me a sympathetic smile, nods and lets me lead him back to the bar. Where I quickly prove to be the worst, rejecting everyone's attempts at striking a conversation with me and failing, again and again, to pay attention to Ricky's speculation on how the next game will turn out.

No matter what I do, my mind keeps running in circles, going from the latest Schwarz incident and how concerned it's making me feel about my pack, to the fact that she's *here* somewhere, with a fiance who's lying to her and who could so easily be exposed.

It's only once Ricky finishes talking about the O'Malleys' tendency to jump the gun in combat and there's a moment of silence that I snap out of it. And I find Ricky eyeing a group of professors to our left.

He must have given up on trying to have an actual conversation with me.

But he *is* watching one of them a little too intently.

"What is it?" I ask him, making him turn around with his eyebrows raised.

I motion at the group he was sort of staring at.

"Oh," he says, a smile lighting up his face as he takes a quick glance. "There's Professor Siegert. I've been meaning to ask him something about Mind Magic, something that won't stay out of my head."

"Go," I tell him.

He squints. "You sure?"

"I'll be fine," I say, rolling my eyes at him in an attempt to be less of a dud. "Five minutes won't kill me."

He gives me a smile and I turn back to my beer, thinking I might actually enjoy a moment of solitude. I *need* one, to come up with a plan to protect my pack and to talk myself out of going to confront Romanov about the asshole prince. The one she *thinks* believes in her.

It's none of my business, I tell myself. It's none of my fucking business.

But as soon as Ricky leaves, I spot her, walking by in a large group of people, all looking holier than thou, with her fiance at the front. Her jewelry sparkles in the dim lights of the Main Hall.

She sees me looking and I raise my bottle in some kind of face-saving greeting, and she slows down, returning the stare for a second. Then she leans to say something to the girl to her right and I breathe a sigh of relief, taking another sip of my beer.

But the next time I look up, she's walking straight towards me, making all my muscles tense up.

*

"Is it any good?" she asks as she comes to stand next to me, the dress that's gliding after her making a soft, caressing sound.

I look into her eyes, so big and so full of some secret life, and I forget what she's just asked me.

She raises her eyebrows at me. "The drink you're having," she repeats. "Is it any good?"

I rush to clear my throat. "Yeah," I say, my voice coming out all rough and low. "Want one?"

"Want?" she echoes with a frown, but her lips are almost curling into a smile, making my heart pound. "More like *need*."

It's at that very moment that I spot Ricky behind her back, frowning at me as he approaches. Nope, I think to myself as my eyes dart to her, standing there talking to me. As quickly and subtly as possible, I gesture for him to get away.

Romanov throws a glance over her shoulder and turns her eyes back onto me questioningly.

"Sorry," I rush to say, "it was nothing. You were saying…"

And I call for a beer for her, urging myself to get it together.

"I won't be long, don't worry," she says, a little tentatively once again, "I just realized I never actually congratulated you."

The bartender slides her beer to her.

I shake my head, genuinely smiling for the first time tonight. "Nothing to congratulate *me* for. It was *you* who really knocked it out of the park."

"Meh," she says with a wave of her hand, making me let out a rough laugh. And then she smiles, albeit a little stiffly, and looks around, seemingly at a couple of women staring in our direction, saying, "Seems like you won't want for victories either."

It makes me frown, the very thought of her picturing me with other girls, but the very next second, her head is snapping to her left and my fox is letting out a low growl.

We're not alone anymore. There's the fiance standing next to her, scowling at me.

It instantly makes my blood start to boil.

"What do you think you're doing?" he snarls.

I take a deep breath to calm myself, but I don't have time to say anything.

"Max," Romanov calls in a warning voice, making me turn to her and see her throw him this surprised, pissed-off look as she grabs him by the upper arm, forcing him to look at her. "Didn't we *just* have this conversation?"

“I saw it, Anastasya,” he says through gritted teeth, “I saw you accept a drink from him.”

“So?” she snaps. “I accepted one from your stupid cousin, too.”

“You’ll give him ideas,” he snaps as he turns to throw daggers at me. “We’re leaving.”

“Well, *I’m* not,” she says as she folds her arms, her face flushing with embarrassment as she avoids looking in my direction.

It’s none of my business, I chant to myself as I keep gritting my teeth. It’s none of my fucking business.

Still, my fox starts snarling as soon as I see the asshole prince grit his teeth and then grab her by the upper arm. “I said, we’re leaving,” he spits out as he starts trying to drag her away.

And just like that, something in me snaps.

I take a step forward, balling my hands into fists in an effort to stay in control. “I don’t believe that’s the way to treat her,” I hear myself growl.

Both their eyes snap to me.

There’s a second of deafening silence before the asshole prince lets go of her arm, gets in my face and drawls, “You did *not* just say that.”

I sense some of the people around us start to pay attention to what’s going on. But I can’t bring myself to care anymore. I return the favor, taking a step forward so he has to take one back. “But you see,” I drawl, “I did.”

There’s a flash of anger through his eyes before he eyes me up and down with contempt, spitting out, “She’s my fucking *fiance*, you fucking asshole. I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

What the… I grit my teeth so hard, I’m grimacing, all my restraint falling away. “Including disrespecting her like that? I don’t think so.”

For a second, he just looks at me. “What the fuck?” he yells out.

And he shoves me, hard, in the chest, and the very next second, I see everyone around us stop and I hear her yell out, “Max!”

But it’s too late. I stare at him for a second. I’ve never hated anyone this much before. And I fail to stop the anger from consuming me and I shove him back, even harder than he shoved me, and I send him flying back into the circle of people around us.

All hell breaks loose. He rushes back, I get his fist in my mouth and someone slams into me from behind. My ears ringing with people’s shouting, I swing my arm back and I land a blow myself, kicking him in the

ribs. It gives me so much pleasure, seeing him grimace and bend over, his hands flying to his chest.

Rip him to shreds, I hear my fox command and I can already picture the blood, the very thought giving me a surge of adrenaline.

But just as he stands straight and I move to land another blow, she pushes herself between us, throwing me such an angry, disapproving look that it makes me freeze in place. It's like a cold shower on a raging fire.

"No, stop it," she yells out, blocking her fiance as he tries to push past her, cursing under his breath. She turns to him and I hear her say, clearly upset, "Fine, I'll go. Just stop."

I'm only vaguely aware of some of the other students still fighting around us, lazily and drunkenly. My eyes are fixed on the two of them as they turn and start walking away. The asshole prince is throwing comments at people staring, looking all too jolly all too quickly, considering he'd just tried to rip me to pieces.

But it's her that my eyes linger on. And she doesn't even turn around to throw me a glance, so I don't know what expression she's wearing right now. But there's this tension in her shoulders, her body in general, that gives me a bad feeling.

Then I see his hand dart to her upper arm and squeeze. She doesn't break it free, but she does become even tenser, making my fox start letting out a low growl.

Bad feeling. Bad, bad feeling.

But it's *none of my fucking business*, I remind myself, recalling the look she threw me when I just now tried to stick my nose in it. So I force myself to go back to the bar, putting on an indifferent face while seething inside.

*

It doesn't work, my trying to distract myself by talking to the O'Malley brothers. I can seem to only think about *one* thing. So while the party is still raging, I finish my drink and I excuse myself, saying it's been a long day and I really need some rest.

I walk out of the Main Hall and into the Entrance Hall, where there are only a dozen or so drunk students scattered around, talking and laughing in low, tired voices.

Feeling worse than I've felt in a long time, I start moving for the Elevator, wondering if I'll be able to sleep a wink tonight.

But before I can even make it halfway, I spot her coming from the direction of one of the inner courtyards. She has her eyes fixed on the floor and an absent, angry look on her face as she keeps marching back into the Main Hall, that is, straight towards me.

It makes me stop midstep. My mind scrambles to make a decision — slink back into the party or try to dart into the Elevator without her noticing me.

I start moving for the Elevator, but it's at that exact moment that she looks up and our eyes meet.

Fuck. What do I do?

I don't stop walking. I tip my head in a greeting and stay on my trajectory, hoping this will be it for tonight.

But the next thing I know, she's materializing right in front of me, making me stop midstep, all my muscles tensing up.

"What?" she asks with her eyebrows raised. Her voice is strangely flat, especially considering how raw she looks. "Don't tell me Grimm Academy doesn't know how to throw parties."

I fail to stop myself from giving her a smile, however joyless. Sliding my hands into my pockets, I glance around the Hall. "Or maybe all this splendor's making me feel like a fish out of water."

For a second, she just keeps staring at me with this funny look in her narrowing eyes.

Then she tilts her head so she's looking up at me from an angle that makes my heart beat faster. "I'd hate to think we're being bad hosts," she says, dropping her voice a little.

It all makes me frown, my eyes darting to her hand.

No ring on her finger. Did she just break up with him?

No, don't go there, I urge myself.

She raises her eyebrows at me.

I clear my throat. "Don't worry about it," I finally say, "you're all being extremely hospitable. But it *is* getting late. Good night, Romanov," I add with another joyless smile and I turn to walk away.

I sense her follow me. I don't stop walking, I just shoot her a confused look over my shoulder.

Just as I reach the Elevator, she comes to block my way, making my eyebrows pull down.

It's with narrowed eyes and in a low but flat voice that she asks, "How does it work? With you and the women you sleep with?"

For a second, I stay speechless, thinking I must've heard her wrong. Then, when she just keeps looking at me and I realize I haven't…

The directness makes me blow a laugh through my nose. "How does it work…" I shake my head in confusion, but then I throw her a smirk, deciding to play dumb to get out of having to answer the question. "Do you really need me to explain how things work between a man and a woman, Romanov?" I ask as I push the button to call for the Elevator.

"Oh fuck off. You know I'm talking about your casual arrangements or whatever you'd call them."

Run the fuck away, I urge myself. And it's at that exact moment that the Elevator arrives and the door opens with the now familiar soft ping.

"Sure," I say as I move to get inside, my heart sinking, "and I'll tell you all about them… some other time."

"Why not now?" she asks as she darts into the Elevator and turns to face me, her eyes challenging me.

For a second, I hesitate. Then the Elevator starts closing and I find myself jumping in.

But I immediately turn to face the door so I'm not looking at her when I ask, forcing a flat voice, "Aren't you tired?" I watch the Elevator close and I push the button for the surface level, my mind buzzing and my eyebrows pulling down.

"No," I hear her say.

And the Elevator starts moving up, but then she presses something that makes it stop entirely.

I just keep standing there, wondering what the fuck is going on and feeling breathless with a heady kind of excitement. "I'm starting to feel interrogated here," I say.

And I don't think it's a good idea for me to look at her right now, but I sense her get closer so I turn to face her. She's standing right in front of me, looking up at me with those eyes of hers.

"So?" she insists. "How does it work?"

And I don't know why she's doing this, but it's starting to piss me off, that she's making me talk about these things with her.

So I decide to put an end to it, to scare her off by intentionally misinterpreting the question. I take a step closer, watching her eyebrows

shoot up. Then I lean in a little, throwing her a smirk as I drop my voice to say, “Oh it’s pretty simple. It starts with me taking my sweet time, and ends with them begging for more.”

I see her cheeks flush, and that gives me some satisfaction at least, but she doesn’t let it deter her. “Taking your sweet time, you say?” she asks. “But these are one-night stands you’re talking about?”

“Sometimes,” I start as I get even closer, my voice now barely above a whisper, “it’s more of an ongoing situation. Why?” I narrow my eyes at her. “Considering applying for the position?”

“What if I am?” she asks in a voice that’s a little defiant, but at the same time low and silky smooth.

And she moves to brush my arm.

The voice and the anticipation of touch all send a wave of heat all over my body, but I shake my head at her and I grab her wrist in my hand, my eyes darting to the finger where the ring used to be.

“What’s going on?” I demand, making my voice soft but flat. And it takes effort to say a certain word without gritting my teeth, but I still ask, “Did you and your fiance get into a fight?”

At that, she shoots me such a cold look, it makes shivers run down my body. I see her grit her teeth as she breaks her wrist free of my grip. For a second, we just look at each other.

“We broke up and that’s the end of the story,” she says flatly, making my mind go blank.

Then, as quickly as if she didn’t just admit to something major, she rolls her eyes, her lips curling into a smile. “But this ongoing-situation type of thing you’re talking about… I think that’s exactly what I need.”

And she’s never given me a smile like *that*, so soft and downright hot, and I have to force myself to take a step back and say, in a much flatter voice, “I don’t think it is.”

“Why not?” she asks. And she gets a little closer again.

I grit my teeth, my mind buzzing in search of excuses. “You wouldn’t be able to keep it casual.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” she demands as she gets so close, all I can see are her eyes.

I look deeper into them, my own eyes narrowing as I snap, “It means I know you’d fall for me, Romanov.”

And I see her cheeks flush again. But then she just throws me a deadpan stare before she drawls, “Well, the arrogance is a turn off, so I think I’ll be fine.”

It makes me blow a laugh through my nose.

“And now that *that’s* settled…” It makes a jolt of electricity shoot through me when I feel her fingers lightly pull at my shirt as she gets on the tips of her toes to whisper in my ear, “Why don’t you take me somewhere?”

The words make me swallow roughly. And her breath strokes my neck and I feel a rush of hunger for more of her touch, a deep, heady hunger. I fail to stop my gaze from flitting down and getting drawn to her cleavage, but then I force myself to snap out of it.

“No, you don’t want that,” I tell her as I pull away, my fox giving resistance.

Almost instantly, she takes a step back, her eyes narrowing at me. “You mean, *you* don’t want that.”

I frown. “What’re you talking about?”

She motions in the direction of the Main Hall. “I’ve seen the kind of girls eyeing you.”

How am I supposed to answer that? I’m not even registering them because I can’t stop thinking about *you*? So I just choose to say, “Don’t know what *kind* they are, but they’ve got nothing to do with it.”

“Then what’s your problem?” she demands with a touch of defiance in her voice. “Didn’t you just admit this was your kind of thing?”

I blow out a frustrated breath. “There’s a difference between having casual sex and being a predator, Romanov.”

She throws daggers at me. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

“You’re drunk and you’re vulnerable. You’re only doing this to hurt your fiance.”

“*Ex* fiance,” she protests, getting all red in the face. “And who are *you* to talk about *my* reasons? Am I a fucking child? Or am I an adult capable of making my own decisions?”

The words make my already poor defenses start rapidly crumbling to the ground.

But it’s at the very next moment that she shakes her head. “You know what?” she snaps. And she moves to get the Elevator moving again. “Forget it.”

I grab her wrist before she can do anything. “No, hey,” I rush to say, making her face me again as my heart starts pounding.

“So you’re really single?” I ask, fighting to keep my voice steady.

She looks up, locking eyes with me. “I am.”

Fuck, I think as all my desire for her comes rushing to the surface.

“Alright, then yes,” I rush to whisper before she can change her mind again.

And I can no longer stop myself from moving to kiss her, but she lifts her palm to her face, making me let out a groan.

“There’d be rules,” she says in a low, serious voice.

That makes me laugh, my eyes darting to her lips again. “Of course there would,” I reply, my voice rough with desire.

But she’s already listing them. “No lingering after, no mentioning it to anyone, no spontaneous meetups, and absolutely no kissing.”

“No kissing?” I protest, frowning. “Come on, isn’t that a bit much?”

“Not on the mouth,” she insists. “Take it or leave it.”

“I guess I’ll be taking it,” I lean to whisper in her ear, making her suck in a sharp breath.

The sound she makes and the smell of her make me go crazy. I let go of her wrist only to grab her by the waist and pull her tightly against myself, her hands wrapping around my shoulders.

Walking her backwards and pressing her against the Elevator door, I move to bury my face in her neck.

But then there’s that soft ping again and she’s rushing to break herself free from my grip.

It’s like a cold shower, being spit out into the garden with people buzzing around, her clearing her throat and smoothing her dress out as she takes a step away from me.

It makes me sad and amused all at once. “Jumpier than a rabbit,” I lean to whisper to her as the Elevator disappears behind us. “Who would’ve thought?”

But judging by the look on her face and the way she takes another step back, she’s in no mood for jokes. “I’m leaving tomorrow,” she announces in a sober voice, now avoiding my eye, “and I’m not coming back until the end of winter break.”

“Tomorrow’s a long time from now,” I protest as I try to get a little closer.

“No, not today,” she almost cuts me off. “Tomorrow, five PM,” she says as she throws me a quick glance. And she moves to walk in the direction of her home here at the Academy. “Meet me at the top of Lilith Tower.”

“At your service, Your Highness,” I reply in a soft, teasing voice, my body flooding with a mix of disappointment and excitement as I watch her disappear to my right.

And as I start walking in the opposite direction, all the way back to camp, with the night around me cold yet fragrant, it finally hits me.

Instead of staying away from her, what I told Ricky our mission was, I’ve just let myself be persuaded into becoming her little fuck toy.

It makes me stop midstep and look over my shoulder, my eyes drawn to the silhouette of the Lilith Tower behind my back. For one long moment, I just look at it. Then I decide.

First thing tomorrow, I’ll ask her brother for her number and I’ll text her to let her know I won’t be coming after all. That’s what’s best, right? For everyone involved.

Chapter 17 - Nyx

Next morning, I find myself standing in front of my closet, wondering what I came there to do. Ah yes, I think as my gaze flits to my reflection in the door mirror. I'm still in the boxers and T-shirt in which I sleep, and I'm supposed to be getting down for breakfast.

But my mind refuses to pay any attention to the clothes hanging in my closet. Last night, I had this dream that startled me from sleep, the first to do it in ages. It was visceral and terrifying, for some reason featuring lots of skulls and horses. And that's all I remember, but the terror I felt when I was having it keeps clinging to me, making my mind keep rushing to it.

When it's not doing that, It keeps dragging me back into the Elevator, into the moment he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me to his body. It makes my breath catch and my ears burn, just recalling it, the way it felt to have him so close — all rock-hard and like a fucking furnace — and it's threatening to keep me stuck in a loop of trying to relive it in as much detail as possible.

A part of me can't believe it, none of it. Not the part with me suggesting it and definitely not the part with him saying yes. I was drunk and I was a little out of it and there he was, His Hotness himself, with the eyes threatening to turn me into a fucking puddle beneath his feet. My heart pounds in my chest and my body floods with desire when an image pops

into my head, of him moving to get closer with an intense look on his face, saying, “Tomorrow’s a long time from now.”

And it is and it’s not. It’s today, at five PM, which is only hours away. But at the same time, I don’t know how I’ll be able to survive until then.

As if to add to my torture, my eyes dart back to my reflection. I drag them down my chest, grimacing as I do. Slowly, I take the hem of my shirt and I lift it up, trying to picture his reaction when he sees me naked.

Cringing, I shut my eyes and turn my head away. Goddamnit, I think when I open them again and see the plain black bra I’m wearing.

No matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to picture girls he sleeps with in anything other than sexy lingerie. All lace and fishnets and halters.

I do have stuff like that, I think as I glance at my drawers. Mostly presents from Max though, I think, a whirlwind of emotions flooding me as soon as he crosses my mind — the fight we had in the courtyard last night, my sleepless night, all the calls and texts I’ve received from him today.

It made something inside me snap, the way he tried to *literally* drag me away from Howe. And while we fought last night, I had to force myself to keep looking him in the eye, this painfully lonely hollowness overwhelming my entire being.

Every moment since then has felt as if someone’s just pulled the ground from beneath my feet. Just yesterday, I thought I’d be spending the rest of my life with that man. Just yesterday, I was still building my whole life around him.

And that’s exactly why I can’t be thinking about it, at all, I tell myself.

If I do, I fear I’ll fall apart. And with the Games and Uncle, there are so many things hanging in the balance.

So I just need to make this as painless for myself as possible by any means necessary, be it eating a whole pack of ice cream in one sitting or getting myself a fuck buddy.

And I shrug it off, returning to my reflection and starting to carefully inspect myself. It was one thing to offer this to His Hotness while the booze was still doing its thing. It’s a whole other thing to be thinking about it in the light of day, being able to see, painfully clearly, all the reasons I might end up not finding him there after all. My skin, so pale compared to the gloriously tanned skin of those shifter girls. My figure, which couldn’t possibly be any further from curvy. And then there are the tits. The lack of

them, that is, I think with a knot in my stomach. And it's only accentuated by the fit of my bra, the way it puffs out a little in the middle.

I let out a frustrated groan, slamming my face into my palms. This is crazy. I can't be doing this. I have to cancel.

Then it pops into my head and I lower my hands, rushing to open the top drawer. There's that one piece that's at least got some lace on it, doesn't make me look so flat, and *wasn't* a gift from Max.

Bingo, I think as I pull it out of the mess that is my bra collection. I look at it for a second, frowning and feeling stupid at the very thought of him seeing me in it, but the alternative seems to be worse. So I take my clothes off and I put it on, along with a matching pair of panties.

This is all the energy I'll allow myself to waste on this, I say in a scolding internal voice. And I proceed to putting on one of my usual outfits, a baggy sweater and a pair of tights.

And just as I'm about to leave for the cafeteria, there's a soft knock on my door. I stop midstep, my mind rushing to picturing *him* outside the door.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I think as I struggle to get it together. He's found out what room I'm in and he's come to tell me he won't be coming after all.

Fine, I decide as I blow out a breath and come to open the door. Utter and total humiliation, here I come. But it's for the better, yeah, definitely for the better.

But when I swing the door open, it's not him. It's just one of Mother's couriers. Wilhelm, I believe. I breathe a sigh of relief and offer him a smile.

He does a curt little bow, gives me my package and disappears.

As I close the door behind him, squinting at the little envelope attached to yet another luxurious ribbon, my initial relief turns into concern.

I'm scheduled to arrive later this afternoon. What reason would she have to send me stuff, today of all days?

The possibility hits me like a hammer across the head. My shoulders slumping and my throat closing, I go sit on my bed and I practically rip the note out of the little envelope.

"What is this I hear of yours and Max's engagement?" she jumps straight to the point, the handwriting angrier than I've seen it in a long, long time. "It's so absurd, I have to come to the conclusion it *never happened*." I can almost imagine her let out that passive aggressive little laugh of hers. "Isn't that right, my dear? Whatever little spat you and your fiance *the prince* had, I'm sure you'll patch things up even before I see you at tonight's dinner."

I lower the hand with the note onto my thigh, fixing my eyes ahead. Fucking hell. Why did I ever think she'd simply make her peace with it? Have I learned *nothing*, I snarl at myself through gritted teeth.

But there's a PS of course. There's always a PS, I think as I lift the note to my eyes again.

"P.S. I'm worried about Ludwig. I didn't expect much from him, but this? Losing a position no one has ever lost before? You should go visit him and see if there's anything that can be done."

It all makes me frown and go back to the bit where she talks about 'losing a position no one has ever lost before'. Has Uncle been taken off the Guardian duty?

And it's far from something I want to be doing right now, but it actually comes as a small mercy, me having to go investigate this. At least, that way, I can postpone thinking about Mother pushing me into getting back with Max. And I can take it as a way to distract myself from thinking about the dreaded today-at-five-PM.

*

When the door to Uncle's office opens, it's not him I find standing on the other side. It's Nikolay, still looking a bit groggy from sleep. The moment he realizes it's me, he throws me a warm smile, at the same time breathing a sigh of relief. "I was wondering when you'd get here."

"It's a bit early for *you*, isn't it?" I ask as I push past him. I'm still angry, and that can't be made to disappear just because of another family emergency.

"Well, Uncle's not well," I hear him say just as I come to a stop before said Uncle's desk and spot him splayed on the armchair beneath the window.

It makes me frown, the paleness of his skin. "Uncle," I start, beginning to feel a little concerned.

When he doesn't speak, I march over to him and I bend over, trying to catch his eye. When I do, for a second, he just stares at me vacantly. "They took it from me," he says in a voice that's barely above a whisper.

"They took what?" I demand, wanting to confirm what Mother told me.

"They fired him," I hear Nikolay cut in and I stand straight, turning to look at him. He has his hands in his pockets and a serious look on his face. "They met today, decided he's no longer fit to be Guardian, and they moved the Box to the dungeon, for the time being, at least."

I frown. “Why would they do that?”

“It sure didn’t help when you reported him being in possession of the murdered professor’s journal,” he snaps.

And that’s not what I meant, but it rubs me the wrong way, what he said. “Yeah, and they’re reacting to that now,” I snap back, “mere *months* later.”

He lets out a scoff, but the anger quickly subsides. As fickle as usual, my brother darling, I think to myself.

He takes a step closer, turning his eyes onto Uncle. “It’s because of how he behaved last night. They’re suspecting him to be, you know…” As he meets my eye, he makes a gesture imitating a crazy person.

I wave my hand in dismissal. “I meant, why put the Box in the dungeon?”

“*Allegedly*,” he says, “whenever they’re replacing a Guardian like this, with no notice, they put it there to keep it from being tampered with. It’s when it’s in between Guardians that it’s at its most fragile.”

“I see,” I reply in a voice barely above a whisper. Sounds more serious than I thought it would. But then it occurs to me and my eyes dart back to my brother, fixing themselves there, squinting. “How do you know all this?”

He hesitates for a second. But then he takes a deep breath and says, “Max. He told me just before you, you know…”

“Yeah.”

“I tried texting him this morning, but…”

Now, that makes me take in a sharp breath. I give a couple of quick nods and I move for the door, rushing to get out of this office, out of this conversation and out of this situation in general.

“Wait,” Nikolay calls after me.

I stop, but only once I’m out the door. He follows me and closes it behind him. “Aren’t you going to do something?” he asks as he motions back at the office, at Uncle, that is.

“I don’t think I *should*,” I say, despite the image of Mother popping into my head. My brother frowns. “I’m sorry, Nikolay, but it sounds like they did the right thing by taking the Box from him. He’s not stable.”

“Is this about Max?” he demands, almost cutting me off. “You think I’m mad at you?”

It renders me speechless, the absurdity of everything he just said. “How,” I start, struggling not to lose my cool, “but *how* did you manage to make *this* about yourself?”

He just blinks at me, all confused all of a sudden. “Because, you know, we had our little spat yesterday,” he starts to explain, earnestly, and it makes my blood begin to boil, but I let him keep going. “And you weren’t pleased when we parted and neither was I, so I just thought it would be good to tell you, you know, that I support you in this. We’re powerful as is, we don’t need Max, right?”

It takes me a second to calm down enough to be able to form coherent sentences. Once I do, I take a step closer to my brother and I say, “First of all, it wasn’t a fucking spat, it was an insulting, incredibly selfish request from you and that’s not the way to treat me.”

I pause to take a breath, watching my brother’s eyebrows pulling down. “Second, I didn’t just break up with *Max*. I think I need a little time away from *you* as well.”

Now, that leaves him speechless. But I don’t wait for the effect to wear off. I’m so sick and tired of all this bullshit and I finally feel like I could put an end to it.

So I turn on my heel and I walk away, heading straight back to my room to pack, take a bath and get out of this stupid lacy underwear. Today at five PM, if he doesn’t like how I look in my regular bra, he can just go fuck himself. He won’t be getting any assistance from *me*.

*

I’m worried that we’ll be seen and I don’t want to be right on time, the very thought making me feel pathetic, so it’s at five o’clock that I finally leave my bedroom dressed in the plainest clothes I own. On legs that at least feel shaky, I start making my way to the top of the Tower, wondering what I’ve gotten myself into.

I’ve just broken up an engagement, I haven’t had sex with anyone other than Max in three long years, and, well, I couldn’t exactly be called a pin-up girl. And I won’t even get into my little problem with finishing.

So, in a minute or so, when I find myself alone with him, the guy everyone’s drooling over, the guy who’s a real-life player, how am I supposed to think I won’t be making a fool out of myself?

I’m so out of my depth here.

I keep climbing, but all of a sudden, my mind is flooding with images of him in some imaginary locker room with the boys, laughing at my expense.

The anxiety threatens to make me stop midstep, turn on my heel and leave.

It’s fine, I tell myself, he probably won’t even be there.

But as soon as I enter the rookery, I smell him and I stop midstep.

It’s dark and I can’t see him yet, but I can definitely smell him.

Throwing one last glance at the empty staircase behind me, I gently close the door. And I take a few steps inside, my eyes darting left right, when I sense a presence behind my back and all my muscles tense up.

For a second, I just keep standing there.

Then I roll my eyes, letting out a soft scoff. “You know I can smell you?”

But when I turn around to face him, there’s no one there.

I frown, wondering what the fuck he’s doing.

Then I sense him behind me again and I freeze, my heart starting to pound with a strange thrill.

I hear two soft footsteps. Still, I don’t move, my mind running around in circles.

Until it stops, abruptly.

First I feel the breath on my neck, then the light brush of fingers against my waist, then the heat radiating off him. My spine arches and my body tingles in anticipation, the weight of it growing with every passing second.

Then there are fingertips tucking a lock of hair behind my ear, but they only add to the torture, turning my breathing ragged as they brush down my neck before returning to my waist.

I swallow roughly and I move to turn around, needing more, but that only makes the arms wrap around my waist, keeping me fixed in place. Then they pull me closer, pressing my back against a rock-hard chest and my ass against an equally rock-hard dick. It makes me bite my lip, my heart skipping a beat and my neck arching, offering itself up, shamelessly and eagerly. And the next thing I know, there’s a mouth abusing the sweet spot on it, my breath hitching and my eyes closing as pleasure ripples through my body.

To turn around, I have to break myself free of the arms holding me around the waist. But when I do, I find him standing so close, looking down at me with intense, hooded eyes, one corner of his mouth curled into a smile.

I just stare at him, anything I could say sounding so stupid in my head.

“Well hello,” he whispers, simply, in that hot, *hot* fucking voice of his, and he moves to pull me closer to him.

The fucking player, I think as I break myself free, my eyes narrowing as I see his eyebrows shoot up.

It took him all of two minutes to get me this worked up?

"Hi," I say, in the most unaffected voice I can muster, deciding he won't be right about the kind of game we're playing here. Folding my arms, I motion at his shirt. "Why don't you lose that?"

It gives me so much pleasure, when I see the little flash of surprise in his eyes.

For a second, we just stare at each other.

Then his lips curl into a smile and he does as he's told, crossing those big arms across his chest to grab the hem. It makes my breath hitch, when he pulls it over his head and my eyes drag down the lines of his muscles all the way to the V disappearing under the waistline of his jeans.

Fuck.

He throws the shirt on the floor and locks eyes with me. I don't look away, I *won't* look away, no matter how hard it is to keep my breathing even.

Instead, I grab him by the jeans and I pull him closer. He just looks at me for a second, his nostrils flaring and his lips parting.

And just as I think he's going to try to kiss me, he starts walking me backwards, getting my sweater off with rushed movements.

Eagerly, I raise my hands to help him. The sweater off, he throws it on the floor and slows down, pressing me against the table and locking eyes with me.

For a second, I feel self-conscious about myself. But he doesn't let me linger on it. He pulls me to him, tightly, my arms raising to rest on his broad, hard shoulders. One corner of his mouth curling into a smile and his eyes boring deeper into mine, he lowers his head and I feel his mouth on my neck again, my breathing turning ragged as he slowly yet forcefully kisses, bites and sucks it, making his way from my ear all the way to my shoulder.

I lose myself, my mind going blank and the world around me falling away, leaving only the body pressed against mine, the mouth that's now traveling down my chest and my stomach, and the hands that keep getting busier, stroking my thighs and squeezing my ass.

And before I know it, he's got my tights and my panties off, and his head between my legs. I suck in a sharp breath, when I feel his mouth on me, my

hands flying to grab fistfuls of his hair as the kiss turns into fervent licking and sucking.

And just as the pleasure rises to a point that becomes unbearable, and I almost let out a moan, I hear a thud somewhere in the distance.

And I freeze and I stiffen, my eyes flying open and darting left right.

The very next second, he's standing in front of me, leaning to whisper, "It was nothing. Relax."

And his voice is so low and rough and hot, all I can do is stare at him for a second and then start work on unzipping his pants.

I see a flash of hunger flick through his eyes and he rushes to help me, pushing his jeans down to reveal a dick so hard, it's shooting upwards.

I lick my lips, feeling myself get even more wet, and he grabs me to put my legs around him, but I push him away a little.

"No," I say, making his eyebrows pull down a little. And I slide down the table and back onto the floor. It'd feel too intimate, having his face all up in mine like that.

So I turn around.

Chapter 18 - Dahrian

I'm just about to get inside her, my breathing ragged and my mind clouded with desire, when she stops me, making my eyebrows pull down as I watch her slide down the table and turn around. And now, there's the curve of her back and the press of her ass against my dick to drive me crazy, but my frown doesn't disappear until she reaches back to take me in her hand.

It makes me suck in a sharp breath, my dick throbbing in her delicate little fingers as I let her guide it where she wants me.

And as she slides me inside that hot little pussy of hers, a wave of pleasure comes crashing down on me and I grab her by the waist, gritting my teeth so as not to curse out loud. I push myself even deeper inside, walking her a step forward and making her grab onto the table before her for balance.

It starts creaking, the table, when I start thrusting. But it's her arching neck, her ragged breathing and the way she's starting to rock her body back and forth that I'm focused on, my hands roaming up and down her back and her ass.

It makes me start losing it, when I up the tempo a little bit and she takes in a sharp breath, her right hand flying to the edge of the table and gripping it tighter.

Overwhelmed with desire, I grab her by the neck and I pull her up a little, taking a bite out of the flesh on her shoulder blade. And as I keep kissing,

her spine arches and she starts bobbing up and down, her pussy clenching around my throbbing dick.

And all of a sudden, I can't take it any more. I stop holding back, I push her head down again and I grab onto her shoulders, squeezing and dragging my hands up and down her back as I slam myself inside her.

And just as I hear her breathing become more ragged than ever and her pussy tightens impossibly around me…

It all stops, abruptly, and I find myself being pushed out of her as she turns around again.

The next thing I know, she's kissing me on the neck and taking me in her hand. I grab her by the waist, and it feels so good, the way she starts working me with her fingers, but I need to get back inside her, so I try to pry her hand away.

She doesn't let me, she just increases both the speed and the pressure, her kisses turning into bites on my neck. The next thing I know, I'm pulling her closer to myself and burying my face in her neck, flooding with pleasure as I'm shot out of my body and into the sky. And for a second, I can't think or do anything, floating on a boundless sea of quiet as I remain standing there, my forehead on her cheek.

When I come to, I'm eager to keep going. And I squeeze her tighter and I move to slide my hand between her thighs, but she just slaps it away.

"Will you turn around?" she asks as she breaks free of my grip, pulls away a little and looks up at me with her hands across her chest.

My mind blank, I don't say anything, I just do as she says. And I pull my pants up and I keep standing there, listening to her get dressed as my eyebrows pull down.

What the…

And just as she moves to walk past me, I snap out of it and I grab her by the wrist. "Hey, where do you think you're going?" I demand with a confused laugh, my voice still unsteady.

She turns to look at me, but she just shrugs and says, "We're done."

It makes me blow a laugh through my nose. "*You're* not," I protest.

"And how would *you* know?" she snaps a little. Then she turns on her heel and starts walking out of the room, throwing me a glance over her shoulder. "I'll text you when I'm back, okay?"

Say something, I urge myself.

But nothing comes to mind. I just watch her walk through the door and close it behind her, too dumbfounded to do anything else but stand there like an idiot.

*

It's with unseeing eyes, my hands in my pockets, and a head full of images, smells and sounds that I leave Lilith Tower and make my way down the slope to the camp, the cold winter day slowly turning into night all around me. I let the echoes keep washing over me, the touch of her skin, the curve of her back, the tone of her voice when she told me to lose my shirt.

But when I think of the way she finished me off and ran away, I can't help but start wondering if she even liked it.

It all makes my mind start swarming, trying to recall things in detail and struggling with the possibility of having misinterpreted a lot of her signals. But in the background of it all, there's something else. There's my fox, watching from the shadows, obviously having something to say, but for whatever reason not wanting to say it.

I slow to a stop, fixing my eyes on the camp before me. It's dusk and my pack is lighting the fires, their glow soft and muted in the waning light of day. Out there, on the third solitary little dock, I see Ricky huddled by his own fire. In a moment, I'll be climbing those steps, I think to myself, and then I'll have others to think about, to tend to.

So I keep walking, I take a deep breath to brace myself for his potential moodiness and I ask, "What is it?"

His ears prick up, but he doesn't say anything. He just squints at me.

"Out with it," I demand as I climb the plateau and start walking in Ricky's direction, saying hi to people as I go.

My fox stays silent for a second. To my surprise, when it comes, the reply is short and dead serious. *This should be the last time you did this.*

It makes me frown. "This?" I ask as I keep walking down the plateau. Still frowning, I let out a little laugh. "You mean my little arrangement with, how do you say, 'the girl'?"

Yes.

"Really?" I drawl. "Yet a minute ago, this was all you wanted, being able to take a good ol' lungful of her."

I'm changing my mind, he snaps.

“Who’s asking you?” I snap back just as I turn to walk down Ricky’s little dock.

“Hi stranger,” I call out to my friend, and in doing so cut my fox off.

Ricky cranes his neck to greet me from one of the two chairs around a small wooden table.

I flash him the widest grin, feeling more energized than I’ve been in a very long time.

And I throw myself in the chair next to him, only then seeing the mood he’s in. Absent, frustrated, even a little angry.

“Ricky, my man,” I say as I clap him on the back, “why the long face?”

He shakes his head and drawls in a mocking voice, “Oh, I’m just the biggest dumbass in the whole wide world.”

“Just that? Come on, out with it.”

He shoots me an assessing look, presses his lips tight and says, “Fine.” He leans a little forward and turns a little to the side so he can face me. “I got this really cool thing from one of the professors, yeah?”

I nod, nudging him to go on.

“And I was failing to figure out how it works, and I told myself to wait until we got back from winter break, but then I gave in and took another shot anyway.”

“And?”

He lets out a frustrated sigh, rolling his eyes. “I destroyed the blasted thing.”

“Damn,” I say with my eyebrows raised. “Sorry, mate.” I give him a smile from ear to ear as I shove at his shoulder. “But knowing *you*, there’ll be other interesting things.”

“I know, I know,” he rushes to say, still a little grumpily, but much less so. “But this one was special. And my toothbrush went missing and now,” he grumbles as he throws his hands up, “now I have to go pack, which is my least favorite activity in the world.” He turns to lock eyes with me, giving me a weak smile. “But hey, that’s life, right? All suffering, barely any reward.”

I just look at him for a second, starting to feel concern for my friend. Then I choose to click my tongue and say in a teasing voice, “Be careful, that might be a little too much optimism to bear all at once.”

“You’re right,” he agrees with a sigh and a sharp couple of nods. “I’ll stop. Sorry, Boss. I know you have much bigger things on your mind.” And

he throws me a half smile.

That makes me frown. I lean a little forward and I make him really look at me, my own eyes narrowing. “Hey, what’s really going on?”

He stays silent for a second. “I guess I’m thinking of not coming back here, you know, after winter break.”

The look he throws me once he says that is apologetic. Of course it is, I think to myself. He knows what his leaving would mean — one less player for the team. What if, in the end, it came down to just one? It’s my duty not to let him give up just yet.

“You just need a little more time to get used to things,” I tell him.

“It’s pointless and harmful,” he insists with a certain sad spark in his eyes. “I spend my days alone in the Library, which is exactly the kind of thing I was trying to move away from.” He locks eyes with me, looking at me as if he really wants help. “I thought I’d do all this differently, Dahrian. You know, coming here, the Games and everything. I thought I’d meet lots of new people, broaden my horizons and the like.”

I shake my head as I pat him on the back. “You’re always broadening your horizons, Ricky. That’s not what’s missing, especially when you look at your, you know, years of isolation. I think it’s meeting new people you should be focusing on.”

He looks away for a second, thinking. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Just say the word and I’ll start introducing you.”

He turns to look at me again, but this time, it’s with an upbeat expression on his face. “What about your buddy, Nikolay? He seems like a nice enough guy. Interesting as well.”

I let out a laugh. This is so like Ricky, I think to myself. “I think what strikes you as interesting is his lineage, not his character,” I say in a teasing voice. “But sure, I can introduce you two if you want.”

“Right after winter break,” he replies with an actual smile. Then he lets out a laugh. “I don’t think I could bear it today.”

“The only thing today is good for is lazing around,” I say as I lean back and let my eyes sweep over the lake.

I’ll text you when I get back, her words echo in my head, making me take in a lungful of air to fight off the effect of the thrill.

All I got today was ragged breathing. Not a single little moan. And it sure as hell wasn’t for the lack of trying. But she *did* like it, I tell myself as I recall the way she squirmed under my tongue and the way she started biting

me near the end. Then again, women don't generally run away from me like that.

If only she didn't turn around, I'd have the look in her eyes telling me the truth, I bitch to myself, but it's with a smile tugging at my lips. After all, she did say she'd text me. Worst case scenario, I'm getting myself a rematch.

"*You're* looking extra perky," Ricky snaps me out of it. I turn to find him squinting at me.

I let out a rough laugh, running my hand through my hair. "I guess I'm getting my old self back."

He breathes a sigh of relief. "That's a load off," he says and gives me a nervous chuckle. "At one point last night, you disappeared and I thought that maybe, you know… I'd failed my mission."

Blood rushes to my skin. Fuck. "Oh, that," I blurt out. I shake my head vigorously. "No, no, you hadn't. Actually," I find myself saying, "I think I'm over it."

He frowns. "You are?"

"Yeah," I say with a wave of my hand, determined to cut this conversation short, "so feel free to forget about what I asked you."

"Well, that was fast," he comments.

I just give him a smile, not wanting to tell any more lies.

"But did you hear?" Ricky insists as he leans a little closer, dropping his voice. "Everyone's saying they've broken up."

And now he's looking at me suspiciously again.

Fucking hell, I curse myself as my mind scrambles for a way out. "Yeah, I did hear. But you know what?" I shake my head. "Romanov, she's a terrific girl, but she's really not my type. I think it was the adrenaline from the fights that was messing with my brain," I say with as much determination as I can muster.

My friend just looks at me for a second. "Gotcha," he finally concludes, making me breathe a sigh of relief. "Well, in my opinion, you've dodged a bullet there. As a match for someone who doesn't do serious, she seems a little too complicated."

Now, that makes me want to pick his brain, make him talk about his impressions. But I bite my tongue. "Look at you," I choose to say, teasingly, "with the player talk."

"Exactly," he replies, quickly turning serious. "Right now, you have the honor of talking to Eryndor, the biggest player the world has ever seen." It

makes me smile and shake my head, but he just keeps going. “Need any advice? I can tell you what makes the ladies tick, how to make them love you, hate you and everything in between.”

I blow a laugh through my nose. “Stop it, you’re scaring me.”

“Why?” he asks, feigning confusion. “I know how to read people, it’s actually one of my strongest suits. For example,” he says with a somber nod, “I can tell you have a best friend you’re very jealous of.” He pauses for a second. “Because of him being the biggest player the world has ever seen.”

Now, that gets us both laughing.

But it’s at the very next moment that we both throw looks over our shoulders, hearing heavy footfalls on the dock behind us.

It’s O’Malley Senior, approaching us with a serious look on his face.

I frown. Before he even reaches us, I demand, “What’s going on?”

He walks around our chairs and comes into a crouch before us. “The dungeon they moved the Box to last night…”

“Spit it out.”

He hesitates for a second. “They just found traces of someone having broken in and tried to tamper with it.”

There’s a moment of silence, during which Ricky and I exchange a glance. “O’Malley,” I say as I turn back to him and see him nod, “I want you to schedule a chat for me with the Archon as soon as we get back home.”

“Will do, Boss.”

“Go,” I tell him. As he gets up, I remember to add, “And once you’re done, don’t go around spreading panic, got it? I’ll take care of this.”

He gives a somber nod and walks away.

My mind buzzing, I turn to stare at the lake.

I can feel Ricky’s eyes on me. “What do you think’s going to happen?” he asks in a tentative voice. “Will we be allowed back here for the second term?”

“Of course we will,” I rush to say, turning to throw him a grin. “We have to be. Now go pack.” I give him another smile. “Everything’s going to be alright.”

Of course, he doesn’t look too happy, but he nods, slowly gets out of his chair and walks away.

I turn to fix my eyes on the lake before me, its surface turning into a dark, shimmering disk. Yes, I repeat to myself, of course we'll be allowed back here. We can't *not* be, not *now*.

Not now? I hear my fox ask, a touch of mockery in his voice as he rises from the depths of my consciousness to stare me down. *Why not now?*

I take a deep breath, saying, "You know why. We have the Games to win and I have my family's future to take care of."

As opposed to what, yesterday? he drawls. *The day before?*

"What, you don't believe me?" I ask through gritted teeth.

Not with you focused on the girl and the sounds she makes while you fuck.

For a second, the little comment renders me speechless. Then I drawl, "In case you haven't noticed, this is not my first time focusing on a woman. So *what* is your problem exactly?"

This is different, he says simply.

My eyes narrow. "No, it's not. *You're* making it different."

He lets out a rough little scoff. *So today, when you two were done fucking, you didn't find yourself tongue tied?*

For a second, I stay silent. "Not saying something right away is *not* the same thing as being tongue tied."

There's a moment of tense silence before he asks, *Do you respect me?*

"Of course I do," I rush to say.

Well, he starts, his voice turning angry, *maybe respecting me is not the same thing as straight-out lying to me.*

Fuck. "Look," I try to appease him, determination in my voice, "this is nothing out of the ordinary. It's just a little obsession that I need to get out of my system." I let out a scoff. "So how can it be a bad thing, that I'm given the chance to do *exactly* that?"

Seconds pass as I wait for an answer.

When it finally comes, it's strangely pensive. *You can't have it both ways, you do understand that, boy?*

I blow out a frustrated laugh. "What in the name of Lycan are you on about?"

I guess I'll have to let you figure it out on your own.

And with that, he slinks back into the shadows.

"Oh the fucking drama," I drawl, rolling my eyes.

I don’t care, I decide as I go back to staring at the lake. I’m about to spend two whole weeks with my brothers and when I come back, which I *will…*

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees and looking over the water with unseeing eyes.

When I come back, I have a little queen of indifference to hunt down and take back into that tower.

And I guess I might need a little more time than I thought, because there’s *something* there that I need to sniff out…

But once I do, I won’t just be making her come. I’ll be making her call my fucking name as she does.

Chapter 19 - Nyx

It's January 21st and in around thirty minutes, I think as I nervously glance out the car window, I'll officially be back at the Academy. Outside, the trees are whizzing past us and I can almost imagine the sound of clumps of snow falling off the branches, but *here*, inside, the silence is only broken by my driver's cursing under his breath whenever he sees a squirrel darting across the road.

I've made it so I'm not driving with Nikolay, simply because I wanted to be alone. And I could be enjoying them, these last moments of privacy before I'm reunited with both him and our cousin for the rest of the year.

But now that the day has finally come, I can only think about one thing. I pull out my phone, for the hundredth time today. And there's his number in my contact list, back from when my brother first sent it to me. 'Nikolay's Buddy', it says.

But now Nikolay's Fiain Academy buddy is *my fuck* buddy. And the last time I saw him…

For a second, I find myself flooded with images of him shirtless, looking at me like that. It makes my breath catch and my mind scramble to relive it all, from the moment I smelled him to the moment he slid his hand between my thighs, thinking we're not done.

It took me by surprise, that I couldn't register him using any 'moves' on me. I don't even know what that would mean, but you expect that kind of

guy to have them and you expect for them to be used on you. This was more like… breathing out as things happen at just the right time, each more delicious than the last.

Holy shit, there I go again.

I expel a breath and I force myself to look, *really* look out the window, the car already gliding down the path leading all the way up to the Academy. As I told myself a week ago, it's one thing to have a fuck buddy. It's a whole other to spend all your waking hours daydreaming about his hands, his lips, or the way it felt, what he did to me...

But I did tell him I'd text him when I got back, I think to myself, my eyebrows pulling down. *When* should I do that? As soon as I arrive? Tonight? A couple of days from now, so as not to appear too eager?

I waste the whole half an hour ruminating, only snapping out of it once I hear Wolfgang say, "We're here, Lady Romanov."

I look around, seeing we've stopped at the end of the path leading from the Dame Gothel statue to the Elevator.

My head snaps back to the driver and I give him a smile, my hand already on the door handle when I say, "Thank you. You can send my stuff straight to my room, I'll be joining my brother and cousin in the cafeteria."

"Will do, Miss."

And I step outside, taking in a lungful of fresh winter air, my eyes scanning the grounds. There are cars parked all around me, other students stepping out of them and saying bye to their families, some of them heading straight for the Elevator, like I am.

Determined to find a way to enjoy the start of second term, I put on a smile and come to stand behind them. The group of girls in front of me keep looking around, waiting for someone. And then that someone runs up to them, a loud squeal piercing my ears when they all spot each other and fall into each other's arms.

As they start chatting about this and that, I roll my eyes a little, but a smile dances on my lips.

It's only once the Elevator door rises out of the ground and we all walk in that the last girl to appear takes off her coat, revealing a sweater with a fox head on it.

It makes me frown. Then it makes blood rush to my cheeks. His cheerleaders. I see they've started knitting, I think to myself.

It's a second too late that I tear my eyes away from the sweater. The others keep chatting away, but this particular girl catches me looking. And our eyes meet for a second, and I see her recognize me, but instead of the usual hesitance that that brings out in people, I sense something else.

Scorn?

The thought makes me frown. But it's at that very moment that the Elevator stops, and the girl looks away and steps out into the buzzing Entrance Hall, continuing her conversation with her friends.

I keep walking, too, straight for the cafeteria as if nothing happened. But there's still the image of the fox head on the sweater flicking before me.

And all of a sudden, I understand I've gotten a little ahead of myself, thinking I should actually text him.

He's Dahrian Howe, for crying out loud. And sure, we had a deal, but who knows how many other girls he's been with since we last saw each other? If I went and sent him a message, I'd probably get one of those 'Who dis?' in response.

My eyes fixed on the archway into the cafeteria, I have to fight not to let the embarrassment overwhelm me. This is good, I tell myself. This is *easier*.

And besides, he's not even that hot.

*

"Anyone want these fries?" Nikolay asks as he puts his phone down and takes his headphones off. There are faint video game sounds coming from them. His eyes are darting from me to Hilde, both busy wolfing down our burgers.

"I wouldn't mind a few," Hilde drawls with her mouth full, but Nikolay's eyes stay on *me*.

I swallow the last of my food and lick my fingers. "No, thanks," I say.

"You sure?" he insists. "I remember you saying you like how crispy they are."

It almost makes me crack a smile. Ever since I told him off, that time in front of Uncle's office, he's been super attentive. And I haven't even seen him with Max, not even once. I guess he really is trying to be supportive.

"Just eat them, dumbass. I know you want to," I say in a warm voice.

He throws me a grin and digs in, putting his headphones back on. "Bloody fang of the God of Stealth, Kurt," he curses as he grabs his phone again, "didn't I say go left. Left, not right!"

I shake my head, my lips curling into a smile.

But it's at that exact moment that my ears prick up, *again* registering someone saying my name. I take a deep breath and for a second, I try to fight the urge.

I fail. Taking my phone in my hand and starting to scroll so as not to seem like I'm eavesdropping, I proceed to eavesdrop. Using my vampiric hearing, I zero in on the source of the sound. All the way on the other side of the hall. A girl saying, "And I don't know how I'm only hearing about this *now*, but did you know how she managed to get an A in Mind Magic?"

For a second, there's silence. Then there's a male voice saying, "No way."

Blood rushes to my cheeks, my breathing turning heavy with anger. It's at that very moment that I sense someone looking and my eyes dart to my right to find it's Hilde. She's staring at me over her book as if she's dying to say something.

"What?" I demand.

She hesitates for a second, but then she puts her book down and, to my surprise, gets up and comes to sit right next to me. My eyebrows pull down, but I don't say anything. I wait for her to talk.

"I know you hear them talking," she leans in to say.

I take a deep breath, determined to snap this in the bud. "It's none of my business," I reply and I move to go back to scrolling on my phone.

"It won't get any better, you know," my cousin insists.

I turn back to her, snapping, "And what am I supposed to do about *that*?"

She looks at me as if I've just told the biggest lie ever. "I don't know where the two of you are at," she says knowingly, "but maybe it'd be time to pull the plug."

"What do you mean, *where the two of us are at*? We broke up, Hilde."

She just looks at me for a second. Then she shakes her head a little, smiling conspiratorially. "Yeah, but not for real, right?"

My frown grows deeper. "Why would I break up with him if not for real?"

"To teach him a lesson about something," she replies without a moment of hesitation. Then she leans a little closer and practically whispers, "Or, you know, make him want you more."

And then she winks at me. *Winks*.

"Hilde," I mutter, not knowing where to even start, "none of that would be right."

I see the smile slide off her face and blood rush to it. “Well excuse me,” she drawls, “*Your Holiness*.”

The reply renders me speechless, but she’s already getting up to go back to her seat. And just as I see her gaze fix on something ahead and she slumps back into the chair, a smell overwhelms my senses and my eyes dart to follow hers.

Dahrian. It’s Dahrian she saw.

My heart stops beating as I watch him walk straight towards us. My mind scrambles to understand what’s going on. Is he coming to ask me why I haven’t texted him? I feel hot blood rush to my face.

And yes, he *is* that hot, I think to myself.

It’s only when he comes to a stop in front of our table that I see Ricky by his side.

“Hi,” Howe says with a smile, his eyes sweeping over the three of us.

They *don’t* stop on mine.

With the corner of my eye, I see Nikolay look up, taking his headphones off. “Well, if it isn’t my buddy Howe.”

Howe blows out a little laugh and then says, “Sorry to bother you all.”

I want to say something, but I just give him something between a shake and a nod, my mind hopelessly blank all of a sudden.

“No, no,” I hear Hilde protest in a voice sweeter and gigglier than I’ve ever heard it. “I mean, why would you be *bothering* us?”

I have to fight not to grit my teeth, especially when I see Howe throw her a wide smile. “I think you’ve all met Ricky,” he says and he looks down at my brother. “I just came to introduce him to *you*, Nikolay. He can’t seem to stop talking about this maneuver of yours from the Second Game.”

“Yeah,” Ricky jumps in, his eyes lit up all of a sudden, “when you used the blade to gut that beast from head to toe, that was just amazing.”

My brother beams at him, saying with fake modesty, “Nothing that hadn’t been passed down to me.”

“Really?” Ricky asks, taking a step closer and grabbing the backrest of the empty chair next to my brother. “Was it your grandfather Nikolay perchance? I’ve always wondered if he’s the one they named you after.”

My brother lets out a loud, jolly laugh. He throws Hilde and I a look as he points at Ricky. “Listen to him. He’s *always* wondered.” He turns back to his new admirer and says, motioning for him to sit down, “Well, it’s actually a funny story.”

Ricky gives a couple of vigorous nods as he does what he's told.

"I guess my work here is done," I hear Howe say.

I have to force myself to throw a glance at him.

"I guess it is," Hilde replies in that giggly voice. "But that doesn't mean you have to leave. We'd *love* it if you stayed." And she turns to look at me. "Wouldn't we, Nyx?"

At that moment, all I want to do is smack her right across the face. "Well…"

But before I manage to come up with a reply, Howe does it for me. "Thanks, but I've a date with junk food," he says, making me turn to look at him with my ears pricked up. His eyes are on Hilde, one hand running through his hair as he lets out a little laugh. "My brothers back home," he starts.

His brothers, it echoes through my mind.

"If they don't see *me* eat healthy, *they* won't eat healthy either. Suffice to say," he continues, his eyes darting to mine, "I haven't had a taste of anything good in four long, *long* weeks." I blush, but then he just looks back at Hilde. "Tragic, I know."

"So tragic," she echoes with an actual fit of giggling.

"But you two," he interrupts as he moves to walk away, only throwing me a fleeting glance, "you enjoy yourselves."

"Thanks," I say in a snappy voice.

"Thank you so much," Hilde rushes to say. "You, too."

He nods. I see him give Ricky, who's still immersed in his chat with Nikolay, a light pat on the shoulder as he turns on his heel and walks away. Turning away but keeping one eye on him, I watch him walk to one of the Fiain tables, where his pack has been saving him a seat.

I force myself to shift my focus elsewhere. But that only makes me see Hilde staring at him over the book she seems to have grabbed for that exact purpose. She senses me looking. "What?" she asks as she turns to look at me.

For a second, I just stare at her. "You should wipe the drool off your chin," I finally say, ice in my voice.

She just shrugs. "So I want to wrap my legs around him. Who doesn't?"

I hear a ping sound from my phone, but I don't care.

"Really, Hilde?" I demand, leaning a little closer as I feel my blood boil in my veins. "Thought you'd have better taste than *that*."

"*Better taste?"* she echoes, looking at me like I'm being thick. "The guy's an f-ing god."

"Exactly," I snap. "So shallow, but to make it even worse, *predictable*."

For a second, she just looks at me. Then she puts her book down and asks, "Have I done something to you?"

"It's one thing to think he's hot," I insist, having to fight not to raise my voice. "It's a whole other to turn into a giggling, bumbling disaster whenever he's around."

There's a moment of silence as I watch her nostrils flare. "You know, Nyx," she finally starts, her voice much colder and much more serious than a second ago, "sometimes you can be a little too harsh."

She gets up and grabs her book off the table in one quick, angry movement. "It's not a good look on a woman."

"And it *is* on a man?" I snap at her as she walks around the table to get away from me.

I throw daggers at her as she settles into the chair opposite me, making a point of neither replying to me nor throwing me another look.

Fine, I think to myself as I grab my phone. And I pull up an article I bookmarked recently, but I can't make myself focus. They're all getting on my nerves, Nikolay having his ego stroked, Hilde playing the self-righteous one, and His Hotness tapping his boot on the floor, making me have to fight not to look his way.

With a sigh, I exit the browser. It's only then that I see a text popup. I frown. Sender? Nikolay's Buddy. He has my number? My heart skips a beat, my thumb darting to press the little box.

"I see you're back," the text says, finishing with a grinning smiley face.

Quickly, I exit the chat and proceed to staring at the screen. What should I say? My eyes get drawn in his direction, seeing him immersed in a conversation with one of his own.

"I am," I choose to type. And I hit send, but then I get the urge to add, "I was planning on texting you, it's just a super busy day."

Another press of the Send button. And then a moment of staring at the screen, not daring to look in his direction.

Just as I decide not to wait around for a reply, I see the three little dots that mean he's typing. I hold my breath.

"Of course it is, Princess," comes the reply.

Princess, it echoes in my head. For a second, I just stare at the message, images of Max, Mother, and the scorched expanse that is my future flitting through my mind.

Then there are the three little dots again. “Sorry about that, Romanov. Wasn’t intentional.”

My lips tug into a smile. Then I frown. Romanov again? “Don’t worry about it, Howe,” I rush to type, the letters failing to convey my tone when I write his last name. “You’re the snowflake, not me.”

“How witty you are,” comes the reply. “Anyway, I’d be happy to book an appointment if need be. Just point me in the right direction.”

My breath hitches when I realize what’s going on. I make myself snap out of it. “Those many servants you apparently think I have, I’ll tell one to reach out and ask if midnight would be too late.”

“She did,” he types back, making my eyebrows pull down. “She was shocked to find she had to go directly to me because, alas, I’ve no servants of my own, but she’s managed to work around this difficulty and now she’s on her way to confirm that I will indeed be free at midnight.”

I have to stifle a laugh. I look away a little so as not to be seen smiling. And what I want to write is, “You’re an idiot.” But what I do write is, “All's well that ends well.”

I press Send and keep looking at the screen, my eyes rounding in horror when I realize what I’ve just sent.

Come on, Nyx, I curse myself, *Shakespeare*? Really? As if he doesn’t already think you’re lame.

With the corner of my eye, I catch him checking the message, putting his phone down and going back to the conversation at the table.

I guess what’s done is done. Now I only need to live with it for the next… I throw a glance at my watch and I take a deep breath to try to fight off the desperation. Ten fucking hours. *Why* did I suggest midnight?

But even as I bitch to myself, there’s a smile persistently tugging at the corners of my lips.

*

I spend the rest of the afternoon in class, absent but pleasantly so. And once the last bell of the day rings, at least for me, I grab my bag, dart out of C13 and head straight for the Library. As I go, I think of all the books I have access to again. Back home, at the Winter Palace at least, Father’s death also meant the neglect of the book collection. Mother’s pawned off most of

it, and now there's nothing of use there, at least when you're researching a certain mysterious Vasilisa Romanov.

So it's with a smile on my face that I enter the hall before the Library, thinking how, despite all my expectations, this is turning out to be a really good day.

Of course, it's then that I spot him. Max, walking out of the Library with one of his sycophants at his tail. And they almost make me try to hide, the awkwardness and the mixed feelings at seeing him appear like that.

But he's already spotted me and is walking straight in my direction with this indecipherable look in his eyes.

For a second, I feel myself starting to freeze.

Then I throw a quick nod in his direction and run into the Library.

Holy hell, I think to myself as soon as I find myself on the other side of the door with no signs of him trying to follow me. I breathe a sigh of relief and go straight for my favorite table, the one all the way to the left of the glass wall overlooking the cave.

It's only then that I realize I haven't picked up any of the books I need. But just as I move to get up, a ping sounds from my phone.

Quickly, I grab it and I switch it to Mute, throwing a glance around the room in case anyone's shooting me a nasty look.

But my eyes dart straight back to the screen. There's a popup there saying I have a text from Mother.

Just what I need right now, I think as the knot of anxiety tucked deep inside my gut rises to the surface. Taking a deep breath, I pull up the chat and I read:

"Do you think she'll ever want to talk to me again?"

I frown.

Then it hits me. She's sent it to the wrong number. And she's about to send another one, at least judging by the three little dots.

I breathe a sigh of relief, starting to type a message of my own, to let her know.

But she beats me to it. "This is what Max just asked me. Is that how it is, Anastasya? We can no longer be bothered to even greet the prince himself?"

It makes me grit my teeth, as soon as I realize what's happened. "Not entirely true, Mother," I rush to type, "I did nod."

I press Send and then wait for two long minutes, staring at the screen, thinking about him going running to a mother. Not *his* mother. *My* mother.

But a mother nevertheless.

"Then all is right with the world," Mother's reply finally arrives, the sarcasm in it successfully coming through. "Except, wait, it isn't. I want you to go to his quarters right now, and apologize."

What the… And I can tell by the time it's taking her to reply that she's using one of her servants to text while she's doing three other things in the background. So this is what I type back, "If you want to make requests like that, I suggest you give me a call."

For a while, I just wait for the reply, fuming. Then, when it doesn't arrive, I realize she's giving me the silent treatment, and a knot twists in my stomach.

My teeth gritted, I let out a deep breath and I type, "I apologize, Mother."

Coming quicker than the ones before, the reply reads, "Apology accepted, dear. But that doesn't mean you're off the hook."

For a second, I just stare at the screen, my mind scrambling for a way out of it all. "Look," I finally start typing, holding mental fingers crossed, "I did nod, so it would just come off weak if I went there and apologized right now. I'll make sure to say a proper hello the next time I see him."

It takes her a moment, but what she writes back is, "Good girl."

That gives me mixed feelings, but I move to put my phone away, thinking the conversation is over.

Then another text arrives, making me let out a sigh even before I check it. "Anastasya," it reads, "we were gracious enough to give you some time to think about things. We just ask you don't confuse it for license to get the family even deeper into trouble."

The family, or the royal we, I think to myself, bitterly. But I just write, "Yes, Mother."

"PS," she adds, making me frown in expectation of another favor, "please make sure Nikolay is taken off the buddy duty. We don't want him mixing with the wrong crowd, especially after everything that happened with Uncle."

Murder, I want to yell at her. There's been a fucking *murder*. But it seems it'll just be forgotten.

Expelling an angry breath, I put my phone away and I sink deeper into my chair. *Gracious enough to give me some time to think*, those are the words that echo through my head.

And they make me lean my head on the backrest and look out the window, reliving that moment on New Year's Eve, during winter break, when I was rushing down the stairs and into the dining hall only to spot him standing there in the foyer, staring at me as one of the servants was taking his coat.

That was the night his incessant texting finally stopped. He brought me flowers and a diamond bracelet that I didn't accept, and we had dinner together, all of us, mostly in tense silence, Max trying to strike a conversation with me, and Mother acting as if she was pitying *him* and accusing *me* the entire time.

"Poor Max," she told me after dinner. "For you to be treating him so unfairly and so harshly, when all he's ever done was indulge you."

And it took all I got, but I stood my ground.

"Fine," she eventually told me, acting as if I needed her permission, "you'll be officially broken up for now."

The rest I'm paraphrasing, but it goes roughly like this.

I'll have a couple of weeks to think about it all and come to the conclusion that this whim of mine is only hurting the family.

I won't be using Blood Magic in the Games anymore.

And for the time being, to help the family keep some semblance of power, I'll be taking on the position of Student Leader.

It pains me, just thinking about it all. But how could I have said no?

I mean, it's so clear she's right, especially when it comes to the stakes for our family. The land is in disarray. The King is putting pressure on the princes to get rid of the excess. Even the most powerful families are under a microscope right now.

And then, to complicate things even more, just after Uncle lost the position of the Guardian of the Obscura and decided to retire — mid-year at that — I go off and break up with Max…

The timing couldn't be worse.

But what am I supposed to do? Proceed marrying someone I'm very confused about at best?

It makes it hard to keep my breathing even, just thinking about everything having turned to shit like that. For a second, I almost let the helpless anger take control of me.

But then I hear a group of students enter the Library, dropping their voices as soon as they do, and it snaps me out of it, the world around me

coming into focus again. I push myself off the chair and I order myself to get a grip.

After all, I think to myself as I start walking towards the History Section, there's absolutely nothing I can do about any of it *right now*.

So the best course of action I can choose right now, I think as I grab *World History after the Unveiling* off the shelf, is simply to focus on the very thing I came here to do.

*

My focus only growing, I spend the next couple of hours perusing all the books I've stacked on the table in front of me. I've already scoured the web for mentions of Queen Vasilisa Romanov. And I got zero hits, which is why my next course of action is taking a closer look at 1865 and 1866 in relation to Peter the Great, the one who led the army that the old man said the Queen led.

If nothing, once I find a certain number of sources with his name in them, it'll at least convince me of the absurdity of even considering the possibility of the man's words being true.

But the conclusion that's forcing itself is an odd one. The year when Peter the Great supposedly died…

There's not a single recorded document of it happening. No Scion or vampire church records, no old pamphlets, nothing.

Nothing.

And it makes me remember the words of my old History teacher. "Sometimes, Anastasya," he'd say, "what they sell you as facts are actually mere conjectures."

Which could mean, I think to myself, my frown growing deeper as I stare at the year marking the end of Peter's rule…

It could mean the length of his reign was a conjecture.

And that, in turn, leaves the possibility of someone else having been the actual ruler in the space of those two years.

It's not very likely, I warn myself, but I can feel my impatience growing.

And now, instead of going back to the index cabinets to search for books mentioning the Vasilisas of the world, I find myself getting out of my chair and walking straight for the Librarians' desk.

As I walk, I decide I won't be asking about Vasilisa Romanov per se. That would probably only earn me a funny look. So once I'm in front of the desk, I catch the plump shifter girl's eye and I throw her a smile, choosing

to say, “Could you tell me if there were any Vasilisas of high rank during the Umbrage?”

“Hm,” she says, scratching the back of her neck. “Not to *my* knowledge.”

I guess it’s a disappointed look that I throw her, because she asks, “Have you checked *Thibault’s Peerage*?”

“I have,” I reply with a sigh. “Is there a more comprehensive record?”

She presses her lips and shakes her head. “Sorry.”

But I’m not willing to give up just yet. And for some reason, I find myself asking, “What if I told you there were bones and horses somehow involved?”

“That’s strange,” she comments with a smile. “But if it’s a visual remnant of memory you have, maybe you should try checking out our old painting collections.”

Paintings, *fucking* paintings, I curse as my lungs fill with excitement. “Thank you,” I mutter and I turn to walk away.

“Do you know where to look?”

“I do,” I reply, only throwing a glance over my shoulder.

I’m in too big of a rush to crack open *Blevin’s 15th to 19th century Art Book*.

And once I’m back in my chair, I’m not hesitating a second. I’m flipping straight to 1865 and 1866.

Holding my breath, I start scanning the pages, noticing that there aren’t that many of them.

And I’m half-expecting to see someone I’ve never seen before, a woman with a crown on her head, against a background of bones and horses.

But what I see makes shivers run down my spine.

Lady X.

Right between a painting of a noble family in their sitting room and one of hunters out in the woods, there’s the portrait of Lady X.

For a while, I just stare at it, my frown growing deeper and my mind filling with questions that just keep buzzing around my head, refusing to be answered.

Then I hear the clock strike eleven thirty. And it makes me snap out of it and let out a little laugh. This is just an absurd coincidence, for my Lady X to appear here.

And besides, if I want to make it to my little rendezvous, I have to leave, like, right now.

Trying not to *actually* think about what I'm doing, I get out of the chair, I grab my bag and I rush back to the Elevator.

But as I ride, that just makes my mind go back to Mother's words. *We don't want him mixing with the wrong crowd*.

My eyebrows pulling down as the words keep echoing inside my head, I step out of the Elevator and onto the Lilith Tower ground floor. And I start making my way up, my mind buzzing. What about my own arrangement with a member of the said 'wrong crowd'? If Mother's not pleased with the thought of Nikolay very occasionally escorting Howe to the Games… How would she feel about me having regular fuck sessions with him in our House's Tower?

If I back out now, I think to myself as I start approaching the top, it would be a thing of the past, a one-time judgment lapse no one ever found out about, a non-threat.

But if I meet him again… Lost in my thoughts, I slow to a stop just as I reach the door to the rookery. "Secrets have a way of surfacing," Father used to tell me.

I frown. Then I let out a little scoff and I reach out to grab the doorknob.

Why the hell am I even worrying about this? This is just a private arrangement between two adults that couldn't possibly be any more inconsequential.

Yes, I think with a smile. I'll do exactly what Mother wants me to and I'll take Nikolay off the buddy duty. They'll just assign someone else to him. No harm done.

In the meantime, I think as I open the door and step inside, the near darkness waiting for me on the other side… In the meantime, I'll just let myself have some fun, which is the very point of all this.

And this time, I see him straight away. He's only a figure in the dark, there on the other side of the room, but he's already closing the distance.

Losing my breath, I shut the door behind me and I let this pull take me to him.

I barely even see his face or feel his body before clothes start flying, hands grabbing and mouths searching as we stumble around the room, knocking into things and sending others crashing to the ground.

It all stops when he pins me against the wall, tightly, one hand caging me in, the other making its way between my legs and under my panties, the

shock of pleasure when the fingers find the sweet spot making me move to bury my face in his neck.

He doesn't let me. Abruptly, he pulls his hand out and grabs my chin to try to make me look at him.

I manage to resist, but he just does it again, more forcefully this time.

I finally see his face and the eyes boring into mine, and it knocks the air out of my lungs, how serious and intense they are.

"Eyes on *me*," he says in a low growl and it makes me unable to tear them away, my breath hitching and a moan almost escaping my lips when he slides his fingers back into me.

*

My face still flushed, I'm rushing to get dressed so I can get him out of here as quickly as possible. Still, my eyes keep darting up to him. He's standing an arm-length away with his back turned to me, *whistling*.

The fucker, I think to myself as I let my eyes drag down his body. Once I made it clear that we're done for today, he threw me such a self-satisfied little smile, and it's all because I failed to stop myself from letting out that fucking moan. It was a small one and I bit him on the neck to stifle it, but *apparently*, I bitch as his whistling grows merrier, it wasn't enough to stop this arrogant bastard from surfacing.

It makes me frown, when the sound suddenly turns into a stifled little laugh.

I stop lacing up my boots. "What?" I demand, my eyes narrowing.

"Nothing," he replies, innocently yet with such amusement in his voice. "I'm just having the best day, hearing all kinds of things about a certain *lady*."

Fuck. The rumors.

"Like?" I ask as I materialize in front of him, shoelaces be damned.

And there he is, looking at me with that grin on his face.

"Like," he drawls teasingly, making me hold my breath in anticipation of him mentioning the A. "You being last in *every* subject your first year. Ouch."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "You fucker," I curse at him. "Do I come blabbing to you every time I hear something about *you*?"

He takes a step closer, his eyebrows shooting up. "Like what?" he asks, a soft, curious smile dancing on his lips.

The writing from that bathroom wall, *Dahrian Howe is the best lay ever*, echoes through my mind, making blood rush to my cheeks.

But he's still looking at me, waiting for a reply. "I don't know," I finally blurt out.

"Oh, *you don't know*?" he drawls. "Well," he says, pausing to lean a little forward and throw me a grin from up close, "consider me convinced."

Shooting him a nasty look, I shove at his chest to get him away from me, which only earns me another little laugh. "And just for the record," I snap at him, eager to save face, "every success I've had, I've *earned*, with hard work and dedication."

He raises his hands in defense. "Hey, nothing but respect from me there."

It makes me frown, when I realize there's not a smidge of mockery in his voice. I stay silent for a second, wondering what kind of game he's playing. Then I shake my head and I say, the words coming out a little harsher than I'd want them to, "You're making us linger."

And I turn on my heel and start for the door.

"It's the middle of the night," he says as he rushes to block my way, still with that grin on his face. "Where are you rushing off to?"

I stop midstep and I throw him an incredulous look. "Lingering is against the rules."

He takes a step closer. "And in that little world of yours, when a rule is broken," he asks, squinting at me a little, "what *happens* exactly? Indulge me."

"Things lose meaning," I find myself saying, without any reservation whatsoever. Then I clear my throat and I push past him, confused about what just happened.

"Wow, that's big," I hear him say, a little more pensively. Then he appears before me, making me stop, *again*. "But then it also never changes."

He sees me frowning and explains, "The meaning. Right? Everything always stays the same and there's no room for discovery, no freedom."

I just let out a scoff and say in a mocking voice, "Sure, and flow is everything and everything is flow, and we should all burn our phones and go live off the land, right?"

That makes him blow a laugh through his nose.

"What?" I demand, frowning.

For a second, he just looks at me as if I'm being thick. "I just find you interesting," he finally says, matter-of-factly. He shakes his head at me,

smiling and frowning at the same time. “Isn’t it obvious?”

And there it is, yet another ‘idiot’ at the tip of my tongue that makes me have to suppress a smile tugging at my lips. I shake it off. “Interesting meaning *weird*,” I say. Then I walk around him and keep going for the door.

“You know,” I hear him say, with yet another laugh, just as I reach for the doorknob, “for someone as smart as yourself, Romanov, you sure can be stupid sometimes.”

I turn to throw him a smirk. “From now on, *Howe*, there’s only one thing you’re allowed to use that mouth for.”

He just looks at me for a second. Then his eyebrows shoot up and he laughs, the sound low but clear, rough but joyful. It makes a flutter appear in my stomach. But I shrug it off, I open the door, and he lets me push him out and shut it behind him.

I keep standing there, my palms pressed to the prickly wooden surface, listening to him leave. He’ll think I’m only waiting for the coast to clear before I leave myself, and that suits me just fine. Because there’s no way to explain what I’m about to do and still be seen as sane.

*

I enter the portrait room, the silence becoming deafening when I close the door and turn around. And there it is, my Lady X hanging off the damp stone wall in near darkness.

The same as always.

And more importantly, *identical* to the painting I found recorded in the Art Book.

For a second, I just keep standing there, right where I found myself. There’s this reluctance in me to give the feeling serious consideration.

On the other hand, I think as I stare at Lady X, I’m already feeling the same rush of excitement I got when I went looking for Vasilisa and found *her*.

Somehow, I *know* this means something.

So I take a step forward and I let my eyes sweep over the painting. The cracked paint, the delicate brushstrokes, the pure black used for the little lady’s eyes.

Softly, I come as close as I can and I take a whiff of the canvas.

No smell of magic whatsoever.

Then, I give the painting three light taps, just what I do to get inside this room.

Nothing happens.

For a second, I keep waiting. Finally, I conclude it's safe, my lips curling into a smile.

I get the painting off the wall and I take my time inspecting it, looking for an inscription at the back or anything that could tell me if my hunch is right.

But there's nothing there.

Fighting a rush of desperation, I let out a frustrated breath and I put the painting back on the wall.

I take a step back and, as usual, I let my body slide down the door and all the way to the floor. "You know," I start, talking to silent Lady X who right now seems to be smirking, "last time I saw you, I called you a stupid fucking bitch."

I blow a joyless little laugh through my nose. "But you must think I'm even crazier *now*, actually entertaining the thought you'd somehow be the imaginary Vasilisa Romanov."

My entire body instantly on alert, they make me jump to my feet, the gush of cold air and something being sucked out of the painting and into the darkness to my left.

For a second, I stay frozen in place, my breathing becoming heavier as I keep my eyes fixed on the painting before me.

It's a different painting now. Blood curdles in my veins when I finally manage to process it.

It's just a painting of a garden now. No Lady X in sight.

But there *is* something or some*one* in the room with me, lurking from the shadows to my left and making me have to fight not to look its way.

Then a strange, echoing female voice sounds from that direction. "How do you know my name?"

Slowly, I force myself to look to my left. I have to fight not to suck in a sharp breath when I spot a pair of narrowed eyes staring at me from the shadows.

So there really *is* a Vasilisa.

Be brave, Nyx, I urge myself. "Were you really a Queen?" I hear myself ask in a breathless voice.

For a second, the eyes only narrow even more. "I believe you didn't answer my question," comes the reply.

And there's something about those eyes, how bloodshot they look, that's keeping me tongue tied, but I force myself to relax and say, "Um, you

didn't answer *mine*, so I guess we're even?"

The next second, I see a tall, dark-haired female vampire in an ancient-looking riding uniform with a skull crown on her head appear before me, grabbing me by the wrist and gritting her teeth as she drawls, "How. Do. You. Know. My. Name."

The touch, only painful at first, quickly becomes unbearable, burning my skin and my flesh with an intensity I wouldn't think possible. Fighting not to scream, I let my eyes dart to my wrist and I see the little red dots appear near the surface of my skin.

Blood Magic, she's a Blood Magic user.

But the pain becomes unbearable and the eyes that are on me are so merciless, I start fearing she'll kill me right then and there. So I rush to say, my voice staggered with strain, "A book, an interview with a man who fought in the Umbrage."

Just as I say that, her magic creates a dark-red bruise around my wrist and I see her eyes dart to it, the gaze lingering.

"Let go," I demand, but she doesn't.

She frowns and then, to my surprise, she leans to sniff at my wrist.

And she gives it a little lick.

What the…

"Who are you?" she demands as she looks back up to me. Her eyes narrow. "Are you one of mine?"

The question leaves me dumbfounded. And I guess I am, and maybe knowing that will make her finally let go, so I just say, "Um, the name is Anastasya Konstantinova Romanova."

She doesn't let go. In fact, she only tightens her grip, making me grit my teeth.

"And what do you know about me," she asks with a sly smile, "little great-great-granddaughter?"

"Nothing," I rush to say, shaking my head vigorously, in case it was knowing anything that would get me killed. "Absolutely nothing."

She just looks at me for a second, thinking. Then she squints. "Then why are you here?"

I just look at her with gritted teeth, defiance making me throw caution to the wind.

She digs her nails into my skin, but it's not that which makes me wince. It's the way she makes my blood burn even more.

“The Games that the Academy is holding,” I mutter, struggling for air, “they’re the first since the Umbrage, and there are these things happening...”

Now, that makes her eyebrows shoot up a little. And in turn, she finally loosens her grip a little.

I don’t hesitate. Squeezing my eyes shut, I grab the knife out of my holster and I swing my arm in the direction of the portrait, stopping just before I cut into the canvas.

Carefully, I open my eyes and I see the surprised, pissed-off look on her face.

There’s a second of silence before she lets go of my arm and I snatch it back, keeping the knife exactly where I have it.

“My turn,” I say, in a breathless yet victorious voice.

I watch her take a deep breath and close her eyes, looking as if she’s rolling them. “Fine,” she finally says.

“What the fuck *is* this shit?” I demand as I throw a glance at the painting.

For a second, she just looks at me. Then she lets out a little snicker, comes to lean her head on the canvas and says, matter-of-factly, “It’s a portrait of me. Didn’t you catch the resemblance, little great-great-granddaughter?”

She lets out a laugh, tearing herself from the painting and looking me straight in the eye. “The sketch was taken on a beautiful day in August, a year before I fought my husband to the death, cut his heart out and took his throne for myself.”

She takes a step closer, making my breath hitch. “You know what I did next?” she leans in to whisper. “I went and I *drained* the painter of this fucking portrait.”

Blood curdles in my veins as she pulls away a little.

“Why aren’t you in any of the history books?” I demand through gritted teeth. “Why aren’t you in our fucking graveyard?”

“Excellent questions,” she says, but then she appears so close, and I can do *nothing* to stop her from forcing the knife from my hand.

The next thing I know, she has me pinned against the wall, my heart pounding as the tip of the blade presses against my throat. But it’s in a playful voice that she says, “But I’m more interested in the Games and *these things happening*, as you so eloquently put it. *What* are they?”

“Um,” I start, swallowing carefully so as not to cut myself, “the Box acting weird and hurting players during the First Game, a murder happening that may or may not be related, the Guardian being relieved of duty, someone breaking in to tamper with the Box—”

At this, she pulls the knife away and takes a step back. There’s a chill in her voice when she demands, “Did you say the Box has no Guardian?”

Breathing a sigh of relief, I first rub my throat with my hand. “I did. They’re currently deciding who the next one will be, but they’ve put the Box in a safer place.”

“Safer place?” she echoes with a mocking laugh. Then she takes a step closer again, her eyebrows pulling down in a menacing frown. “Do you know how terrible the Box’s magic can be, girl? It’s not for nothing that it *needs* a Guardian.”

“You’re talking as if I can do something about it,” I snap at her.

“Didn’t you say you were one of mine?”

“I am,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Well fucking take care of it then,” she snarls at me as she stabs the tip of my knife into the doorframe to her right.

Shaking and seething at the same time, I start moving, eager to get the hell out of this place. And I pull my knife out of the wood, but she stops me before I reach for the doorknob.

“Actually,” she says as I turn to look at her. She’s pointing at the nasty bruise on my wrist. The bruise that’s a lot more than *that*. “I suggest you first take care of *that*. Might end up dead if you don’t,” she adds matter-of-factly. “And *then* how will you do what I asked of you?”

I don’t reply. I just grit my teeth and I watch her disappear back into the painting, Lady X returning to her garden in all her meek splendor.

And I’ve no idea what just happened, I think to myself as I leave the room and then the rookery itself. But I do know I’m going to bed knowing I won’t be able to sleep a wink.

Chapter 20 - Dahrian

With a persistent grin on my face, I slowly make my way out of Lilith Tower and down to the camp, thinking I'll be going straight to bed with the smell of her still clinging to my skin and that little moan echoing in my head.

But as soon as I come close, I see the light in my tent is on.

And I frown and all my muscles immediately tense up, my fox starting to emit a low growl. I know there are no members of my pack who'd choose to disrespect my privacy like that, which is how I know there *must* be something wrong.

I practically run there, my mind scrambling in search of possible explanations. But when I fling the flap open and barge inside, there's the Archon sitting on the chair in front of my desk, looking up at me from her phone with her eyebrows raised.

I breathe a sigh of relief and I walk inside, my mouth cracking into a smile as she stands up to greet me. "Ricky said you wouldn't mind me waiting in here," her strong voice booms through the tent as she claps me on the back.

"Course not," I say as I grab a footstool from under the bed. "Though I sincerely hope you're only here because you miss my delightful sense of humor," I say with a tentative laugh as I take a seat in front of her.

“Wouldn’t know if I’d miss it,” she says flatly. “Never heard you say anything funny.”

I blow a laugh through my nose and she gives me a smile, but it’s a joyless one, and it makes me immediately turn serious.

“Dahrian,” she starts as she bends a little forward, resting her elbows on her knees and clasping her hands, making both mine and my fox’s ears prick up, “what was it that I asked you before you arrived here?”

Fuck. Has something happened? “Keep the peace and stay until the end,” I recite, summoning determination into my voice.

She looks away for a second, squinting. “And would you say you’re upholding your end of the bargain?”

“I would,” I say, though not without hesitation, simply because of the tone of her voice suggesting it might not be the case after all. “There haven’t been any major incidents,” I continue in my reporting voice, “the two groups seem to only be getting closer, and not even this thing with the Box has upset that. As for the Games, we’re still ahead.”

She gives a few slow nods. “And what about *you*?” she asks as she looks up at me.

“I’m sorry?” I ask.

“You’re staying focused?” she rephrases, looking deeper into my eyes and squinting a little as she does.

For a second, the question leaves me dumbfounded, an image of a pair of dark eyes flicking through my mind. “Why would you even ask that?”

She waves her hand in dismissal and starts getting up, making me follow suit. “Just a couple of things that stuck with me,” she blows out as she looks at me again, this time with a little smile. “You being late for the Second Game, that little spat of yours with Prince Aalders…”

I let out a nervous laugh, running my hand through my hair and feeling like a pup being scolded, as I still sometimes do in front of the all-powerful Brogan.

“What?” she demands, looking at me with kindness in her eyes. “You think I didn’t have to listen to the kids go on about it?”

“It was harmless, really,” I start, but she cuts me off.

“It’s fine,” she says as she comes to stand a little closer, pressing her lips tight. “I just wanted to check in with you because there’ll be changes happening.” She pauses for a second, making me think there’s something

bad happening after all. “I’ll need you more focused than ever because I won’t be able to be there for you all as much.”

Now, that makes me frown. But she doesn’t give me the chance to ask what’s happened.

“Our two Academies have appointed me as the next Guardian of the Obscura,” she just says.

There’s a moment of silence before I let out a scoff. “But that’s a good thing, right?” I ask. “Sure, it’s an obligation, but it’s an honor.”

And I try to gauge how she feels about it, but she just gives me another smile and a pat on the back and says, “So it is.”

And with that, she walks out of the tent, the cold winter air managing to worm its way in despite having only a second before the flap falls back into place again.

For a second, I just remain standing there, my mind buzzing.

Then I turn off the lights and I throw myself on the bed, putting my arms behind my head and fixing my eyes on the tent canopy above.

There was something off there, my fox’s voice booms inside my head.

“No shit,” I tell him, but the reply’s not snappy. It’s just… pensive.

No, he protests, making my ears prick up, *something was off about* her.

I frown. “She was tired. And she didn’t look pleased she was getting the *honor*.”

For a second, he stays silent, but I can sense him shaking his head. *It was something else. Like a smell.*

I let out a scoff. “She came here in the middle of the night,” I start, “obviously straight from the meeting where the decision was made. You sure it couldn’t have been all the other Originals’ scents on her?”

He thinks for a second. *I guess you’re right.*

“Grand,” I say, my mind already rushing back to the top of Lilith Tower, “then you won’t mind if I say goodnight.”

He scoffs to show he doesn’t care.

And just like that, I find myself thinking about it again. The restraint I found in her eyes when I told her to look at me. And I’m feeling good about it, because I now know for sure she’s enjoying herself. But I’m no closer to making her come than I was before, and it’s so little time, what she’s giving me. Not to mention zero options. Whenever I tried to stop her from pushing *me* over the edge, she only doubled her efforts in the opposite direction, I

think with a squint. And once I did, when I tried to shift the focus back onto her, she turned cold and started getting dressed again.

It's then that I hear my fox again. *Why did you lie about being focused when you're clearly not?*

"I *am* focused."

Even if you are now…

That makes me let out a low laugh. "She's a fucking princess all up in these rules, ambitions and whatnot. I think I'm safe."

You'll have to keep me away from her, you know?

I have to fight not to let out a frustrated breath. "I already am."

I don't mean it like you think I mean it, he snaps. *If you really want to keep this nonsense up…* He pauses as if to accentuate *exactly* how much it's nonsense, making me roll my eyes. *I can't forbid you, boy. But from now on, with everything that's going on,* he continues, his voice turning serious, threatening even, *never letting me near her, that stops being a mere suggestion. You need to start taking it seriously.*

Acting like I'm an ignorant pup, I mutter to myself.

And what, you're not? he snaps.

For a second, I just keep lying there in silence, trying to fight the urge to talk back. "Fine. Now, goodnight already."

Chapter 21 - Nyx

It's with a spring in my step that I get dressed in the morning, and come to stand in front of the window to observe the students as they walk the castle grounds down below. It's been a week since the second term started and everyone is still fresh from winter break, the excitement cutting the cold winter air.

But that's not why I'm feeling this peppy. It's January 31st, my twenty-third birthday, which gets me a whole year closer to finishing school and finally getting down to business. I can already picture myself returning to the estate on our native land and taking things into my own hands.

Maybe, just maybe, I dream as I keep gazing out the window, that will involve doing great things, but gods know I'd settle for something much smaller as well, like, for example, making the people under our wing a little bit less miserable.

To make things even better, right now, not even the thought of Max no longer being in the picture can ruin it for me.

And tomorrow… Tomorrow, we have the Third Game scheduled, I think as I walk up to the mirror to give myself a once-over. And I've no idea what it'll be, of course, but it still makes me excited, the very thought of leaving a certain someone biting the dust.

He's a curious one, I think to myself, for a moment lingering on the squint he sometimes throws me, as if he can see right through me. Despite

all his childishness, he sometimes makes me feel as if I'm dealing with someone much older than twenty four. At least he's somehow making all the other students his age seem as if they've just crawled out of the crib.

For a second, I consider texting him to meet me tonight, my mind rushing to the abandoned classroom on the ground floor in which we fucked for the third time since this whole thing started. Heat washes over me when I remember that thing he did with his tongue, driving me mad with desire. I need *more* of that.

But it's only yesterday we met up in that classroom and I don't want to be making a habit out of seeing him more than once a week.

Besides, I tell myself, I have the dinner tonight and now that I think about it, even if I didn't, it might be a little weird, of all days, to choose my *birth*day to meet up with my fuck buddy.

And it makes some of my excitement deflate, but that's the decision I end up going with. And I grab my bag, leave my room and start rushing down the stairs.

On my way, I notice a couple of people throwing me stares. And for a second, my mind threatens to linger on them, but I tell myself not to read into it and keep going straight to the Library.

But it's as soon as I land in the Common Room that I change my mind.

There's Nikolay at our table, sitting in his armchair clad in an expensive suit, looking as if he's waiting for someone.

For a second, I frown. Then it makes my lips tug into a smile, when he spots me and waves me over. Is this about my birthday, I think with a warmth spreading through my chest.

"Who is this dashing young man?" I ask as I approach him, making my voice all theatrical like we used to, pretending to be actors during those solitary afternoons in Mother's quarters. "Early morning light makes it hard to put a name to the face."

But Nikolay doesn't smile. "Had a meeting," he just says and motions for me to take a seat.

Frowning, I do as I'm told.

"Is it true, sis?" he asks as soon as I settle in.

"What?"

"That you want Max back?"

I shake my head, throwing him an incredulous look. "Who told you that?" I demand. "Was it Mother?"

“It’s what everyone’s saying,” he says as he motions at the room in general. “I mean, not as nicely, of course.”

I turn to look around, making a couple of heads snap back, their owners scrambling not to be caught looking. So that’s what those stares were about. Also, ‘not nicely’, that’s what Nikolay just said. Which means they’re not just saying that I want Max back. They’re saying that I’m begging him to get back with me, or some other stupid shit like that. Shit that would make *him* look good, of course.

I feel myself start to fume. I have to fight not to let the emotion show when I turn back to my brother and say, “Well, the other day, they came out with the revelation that it was *him* who broke up with *me,* not the other way around.” I pause to throw him a frown. “You *do* understand that rumors don’t necessarily have anything to do with actual truth?”

He impatiently waves a hand, as if nothing I've just said is of any consequence. “But *is* it true?” he demands, leaning a little forward in his chair.

His persistence makes me frown. “Of course it isn’t,” I snap at him. Then I squint. “But what’s it to *you*?”

Letting out a frustrated breath, he throws himself back in his chair. “The land sale… It’s not going well.”

“The land sale?” I demand, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees, my frown growing deeper. “What do you mean by that? There *is* no land sale anymore.”

I’m no longer with Max, I think to myself, and that was all *his* doing.

Nikolay just clicks his tongue at me. “Oh yeah there is. But ever since you called off the engagement, I’ve only had trouble with it.”

I have to fight not to start yelling at him. “Really? Can’t your buddy *Max* help you with that?”

“Well, if you hadn’t broken up with him,” he pushes himself up a little to hiss at me, “maybe he’d still be replying to my texts.”

Now, that makes me slump back in my chair. “I see,” I just say, things finally falling into place in my head. When he, *my brother darling*, told me he supported me in calling off the engagement, he only did so because Max had already broken up with *him*.

“Nevermind,” he says as he sinks back in his chair again and leans his head on the backrest, a sour look on his face, “I just thought you might have

made all the complications go away. I guess I'll just have to deal with it on my own."

For a second, I stay silent, trying to fight off the urge to grab him by the collar, lift him off that fucking chair and start shaking his pouty, whiny ass until he begs me to stop. He'll deal with it on his own, I think to myself with bitterness in my mouth. If I let him try to *save* the land, he'll only end up fucking running it into the ground.

So I decide I have to do *something* to get his mind off it. I take a deep breath and I say, "Hey."

He doesn't lift his head off the armchair, but he does turn it a little, to gaze at me from an angle with this sad, grumpy look in his eyes.

It makes me stay silent for a second and my voice soften when I say, "You know, Nick, I realize things are tough right now." I pause for a second. "It's just, I've never pictured you doing stuff like that. Seems so… trivial for someone such as yourself."

"Yeah?" he asks, his face lighting up.

"Yeah."

"Maybe you're right," he says as he pushes himself up in the chair, staring at me with unseeing eyes and a slightly manic expression on his face. "Maybe I should be one of those people who make fortunes investing in stuff."

For a second, I just blink at him, wondering if I should tell him it's not just browsing *stuff* when you feel like it that that particular job would entail. I decide not to get into it. "Yeah, think about it, sure," I tell him with a warm smile.

"Yeah," he replies with a grin, springing up from his chair and leaning to give me a peck on the cheek. "Thanks, sis. Now I have a raid to attend…"

Raid? Ah, video games.

"...but tonight at the party, we can talk about it some more."

"Party?" I ask, my eyebrows pulling down. "You mean, *dinner*."

"No, Howe's *party*," he says, mouthing the word as if to a half-wit. Then he lets out a self-satisfied little chuckle and turns to walk away.

But I've already gotten up and come to block his way. "No, Howe's not throwing any parties at the moment," I say as I squint at him. "As Student Leader, I think I'd know about it."

Nikolay shrugs. "I don't know, *everyone* got the e-vite."

It feels like a slap across the face.

But my brother's moving to push past me and I reach out my hand to stop him. "Hey," I ask, dropping my voice a little, "does that mean you're not coming to my birthday dinner?"

He throws me a grin. "Oh yes, happy B-day. And sure I am, sis, wouldn't miss it for the world." He claps me on the back and then winces a little, apologetically. "I'll just have to duck out a little early. But you'll probably do the same, won't you?" he asks, but it's not an actual question.

No, I won't, I think as I watch him turn on his heel and stroll away. I *won't* because *I'm* the fucking… I grind my teeth, my hands balling into fists.

I guess this won't be such a nice day after all, I think as I start walking out of the Common Room.

Mother did remember my birthday this year, but only as an excuse to get me in the same room with Max, people are once again spreading rumors about me, and Howe's throwing a party I don't even know about.

And, sure, I get it. After all, I'm the one who insists on keeping the conversation to a minimum and not having anything to do with each other outside of our little arrangement.

But it still stings to be singled out like this.

It makes me even grumpier, when I remember I've never even received the form. Because, besides not getting the fucking e-vite, being Student Leader, I now have to go see why they haven't filed the official paperwork, for a fucking party I wasn't even invited to.

On my fucking birthday.

*

Gripping a copy of the form as I fight to stay calm, I march down the slope to the camp. I don't want to be that person, but it's proving to be hard, raising above the urge to rehearse saying, with a fake smile, "No, sorry, but it's just too late for you to get the approval."

So it's only once I'm on the plateau, looking around, that I realize how deserted the camp is.

"Need help?" a shifter girl asks, smiling, as she sticks her head out of one of the tents.

"Yeah," I blurt out, clearing my throat and frowning a little. "I'm looking for Howe."

She tilts her head at me, then walks out of the tent with a light scarf in her hand, making me frown when I see how beautiful she is. "He may be

indisposed right now," she says.

"Still have to see him," I tell her, a little too harshly.

"Gotcha." She throws me a wide smile, making me feel like a real bitch for reacting to her the way I did. And she throws the scarf on and says, "I was just about to go down there myself. Follow me."

I force myself to throw her a smile and I do as she says. As we walk, my eyes get drawn to her bright nail polish and the colorful highlights in her rich, dark hair.

"Sorry for being a little slow, it's less than ten minutes ago that I woke up," the girl tells me as she keeps leading me in the direction of the Grimm Tower, behind which looms the woods bordering the castle wall. She throws me another smile as she says, "Dahrian sure likes to start trainings early."

I notice a familiarity in the way she says his name, but it's at that exact moment that I hear some kind of chatter, I turn away from her and I spot them all. A bunch of students standing and sitting around in a wide circle, watching the fight between a dozen shifters in their animal forms.

One of which is the largest, most dangerous-looking fox I've ever laid eyes on. It's stalking left right, calmly but with its focus on the wolf shifters circling it, who all seem to be engrossed in waiting for a chance to attack.

"I'll go tell him you're looking for him," the girl says, snapping me out of it and making me realize we've come to a stop just a little outside the circle of people mesmerized by the fight.

It's only when she starts marching into the 'ring' that I realize what she's doing.

She's planning on interrupting the session? I open my mouth to yell no after her, but it's too late.

The fox has already spotted her.

It stops stalking.

The next second, my eye gets drawn to one of the wolves surrounding it, taking the little distraction as an opportunity to attack. I see the fox lazily swing its front paw, sending the wolf flying back and hitting the ground with a low thud.

My breath held, I watch the girl keep walking, zero hesitation in her step. The fox stalks a little closer and she looks up to say something.

And the next moment, my heart is pounding because the giant fox is looking straight at me.

But before I can even process what's going on, I see it kick itself off the ground and dart into a little grove to the right of the 'ring'.

I don't tear my eyes away from the spot, not even as the rest of the shifters resume their training.

And the next thing I know, he's marching straight towards me, his pants already on, but his shirt still in his hand.

He's actually going to pause his training for this, I think to myself, excitement flooding me as I watch him approach, pulling his shirt on as he goes.

But when he comes to stand in front of me, there's a frown on his face.

And there's also a touch of coldness in his voice when he says, "Thought you said no spontaneous meetups."

They throw me off, both the frown and the voice.

"That's *not* what this is about," I blurt out.

"Doesn't matter," he says, this low growl in his voice making my eyebrows pull down. "From now on, you won't be coming to our trainings. Got it?"

For a second, I just keep frowning at him. "Um, yeah," I drawl as I motion at the actual fucking *crowd* behind him, "because they're obviously such *private* events."

He doesn't bother to look back. He takes a step closer, making me take one back. "My fox," he starts, still so serious, it's leaving me dumbfounded, "he's not good around noblewomen." He pauses to lean in a little and drops his voice to a near whisper. "Likes to pick his teeth with their privileged bones."

I can't even tell if he's being serious or if he's fucking with me. But there's this rough finality in his voice that forces me to spit out one little butthurt, "Alright."

"Alright, *what*?" he demands.

What the…

"Alright," I practically hiss, my hands balling into fists, "I won't be coming to the trainings."

For a second, he just looks at me. Then, as if nothing happened, his mouth cracks into a grin.

"Grand," he says as he takes a step back, looking and sounding a lot more like himself all of a sudden.

“Yeah, *grand*,” I drawl, frowning and moving to get *very* far away, *very* quickly.

“Hey, now that *that’s* settled,” I hear him say before he blocks my way, casually sliding his hands into his pockets and tilting his head at me, “you still have to tell me what this visit *is* about.”

It makes me frown. Is he *actually* planning on ignoring the way he acted a fucking second ago?

Smiling, he raises his eyebrows at me. “I dare not think Lady Romanov would come *in person* to RSVP for the party tonight.”

I *was* invited after all? Fuck. The form.

“Actually…” I make myself dismiss all this weirdness, I remind myself what I came here to do in the first place, and I raise the form I’ve been gripping in my hand this whole time. “I’m here to give you *this*.”

And I hold it out for him with one quick, sharp swing of my hand.

He squints at me. Then he takes the paper from my hand and starts skimming the content.

“It’s the form you needed to file *before* you proceeded to throw a party,” I explain. Making sure not to get any closer, I point as I add, “You need to fill all this out, read the Grimm Academy event regulations and check this box right here, saying you’re responsible in case you break *any* of them. Got it?”

He looks up at me, that mouth curling into a lazy, smirking little smile. “Lemme guess, you know all the *Grimm Academy event regulations* by heart.”

“And what if I do?” I protest, throwing him a nasty look in the process.

He blows out a little laugh and then frowns, throwing another glance at the form. “We’ve never had to do this before.”

“Only because the previous Student Leader wasn’t doing her job.” I fold my arms. Despite him making me feel so confused and stupid for even being here, I’m determined to stand my ground. “That’s not how it’s going to work with *me*.”

It makes blood rush to my cheeks, when he raises his eyebrows at me and lets out a mocking little wolf whistle.

But he doesn’t wait for a reaction. He cranes his neck and shouts, “Ricky.”

The power with which his voice booms across the field makes me lose my breath.

I'm still staring at him when he turns back to me, throws me a hot, hot grin and says, "He's the one in charge of this kind of thing."

It's just at that moment that my eyes dart to a figure jogging up to us.

"Ricky, mate," Howe tells him as he slows to a stop, "we've got a new sheriff in town." He gives him the form. "Make sure this is all taken care of."

Ricky nods, throws me a funny little look, turns on his heel and starts jogging back to the 'ring'.

I turn my eyes back onto Howe, who's smiling at me. "Happy?"

"Sure," I snap, frowning, and I move to finally get myself out of there. "Bye."

But he just follows me. "So I'll see you tonight at nine?" I hear him say.

I don't stop and I don't turn to look at him. "Not coming."

"Why the hell not?"

"I have this thing."

"Like a date or something?"

"No, like a family dinner," I say with a frustrated frown. I pause before I choose to add, "With some dignitaries thrown into the mix."

"Dignitaries?" I hear him echo with a little laugh, still walking beside me. "Well, they're a dime a dozen, everyone knows *that*. And the party before the day of the Third Game, there's only one of *those*."

And he walks around me, blocking my way. "Come on," he urges as he locks eyes with me, "cancel the boring stuff."

What the fuck is it with him today? I throw daggers at him. "I can't," I snap, glancing around to make sure no one's listening. And it somehow feels stupid, but I still choose to say, "It's for my birthday."

His eyebrows shoot up. "Your birthday?" he echoes, turning the volume up a little too much for comfort.

"Keep your voice down," I hiss at him. "You know how big of a fight I've had to put up to keep the date from going public?"

He laughs. "Such highly relatable problems you have," he comments with a grin, sarcasm lacing his every word.

"Ha ha," I drawl in the flattest voice I can muster. Then I take a step forward, getting in his face and making his eyebrows shoot up. "See how you like *this*. If I hear a single word about it, I'm going to kill you with my own two hands."

“Understood,” he replies, with a serious nod and without so much as a second of hesitation. “So, in short… I tell *everyone* it’s your birthday and I see you tonight at nine.”

I frown at him, to which he just throws me a grin.

I roll my eyes and move to walk away again.

He doesn’t let me. “Fine,” he rushes to say. “I say nothing about no birthday… and I see you tonight at nine.”

And then there’s another grin.

I have to fight not to let out a frustrated groan. “You say nothing about no birthday,” I start, making my voice as final as possible, “and tonight at nine, you see whoever the fuck you want, *except* for me.”

He just looks at me for a second. Then he squints. “Yeah,” he drawls, his lips curling into a mysterious little smile, “we’ll see about that.”

And with that, he turns on his heel and walks away. For a second, I just keep standing there, frowning as I watch him go back to training.

What the hell was all this about?

My fox is not good around noblewomen? What’s that even supposed to mean? And, *Yeah, we’ll see about that?* As if he can force me to come to a party I don’t want to come to.

I let out a frustrated breath, I turn around and start marching away, determined to put it out of my head for good.

*

The more the day goes on, the more untethered and desolate I get. And I don’t really want to go visit the crazy portrait lady, but an hour before I’m supposed to start getting ready for the dinner, I still find myself climbing the stairs to the top of the tower.

It’s been a week since I was last here, I think as I close the door to the painting room behind me. And there’s a part of me that expects it all to be gone, but there she is, still looking at me from the canvas, as silent and subservient as ever.

I slide down to the floor, resting my back on the door.

And for a second, I just look at her, missing the time I only ever came here to wallow in my misery.

If that were still the case, I’d tell her exactly why the very thought of my birthday dinner makes me miserable. I’d talk about the looks they’ll be throwing me now that I’m no longer to become Princess, making me fearful for my future. I’d describe the dress Mother’s making me wear and admit it

makes me feel like the worst fucking person in the world, that I sometimes wish *she* was the one who died instead of Father.

So of course it makes me feel sad, thinking about no longer being able to tell her about this. After all, it's stuff I have no one to talk to about.

But it makes me angry, not sad, when this morning's training session pops into my head, for the millionth time today.

I don't know why it bothers me this much, but there's this burning need to figure out what the hell that was all about.

Because I *know* it was bullshit, what he told me about his fox not liking noblewomen. Or was it?

No, it *was*, I tell myself.

And I know *exactly* what really happened. It just comes as a surprise because, so far, I've somehow managed to avoid even thinking about it.

He told me not to come while they're training because he's a fucking player and I'm not his only toy, not even at the moment.

And somewhere on that training ground, I think to myself as my mind conjures up the image of the girl with the highlights, he had some other girl he's seeing watching them fight.

It'd make a lot of sense, I argue as this sinking feeling overwhelms me, it'd make a lot of sense to keep your fuck buddies from interacting with each other.

Sighing out loud, I let my head fall back and rest on the door, my eyes fixing on Lady X at an angle. It makes her seem even more delicate and inconsequential.

It makes me grit my teeth, decide to stop with the pity session and get up off the floor.

And I *really* don't want to talk to this woman right now and I don't even really need to. After all, at the moment, there are no tensions at the Academy, and the Box is no longer without a Guardian.

But the Third Game is tomorrow and even if nothing bad happens for the rest of the school year, I still have so many questions.

So I force myself to take a step closer, clear my throat and call out, "Vasilisa."

It makes me stiffen, when she slinks out of the painting and tilts her head at me. "Well hello, little great-great-granddaughter."

Despite being prepared to see her, it still renders me speechless, how absolutely fucking scary she looks.

She takes a step closer, seemingly enjoying my silence. “Have you done what I asked of you?”

I make myself snap out of it. “It’s been done by *someone*, sure.”

She appears right in front of me, her hand once again grabbing my wrist, pain shooting through my entire arm. “No one taught you how to give a straight answer, girl?”

“I didn’t have to do anything,” I rush to say, cursing myself for being this stupid again. “By the time I was done with you, the Academies had already chosen the new Guardian.”

“Perfect,” she says happily, releasing me from her grip. “Now all you need to do is keep an eye on them.”

I just look at her for a second, rubbing my wrist. “I can’t do that,” I say with a shake of my head.

She leans against the wall and lets out an annoyed little scoff. “Is there anything you *can* do?”

“Things are fine right now,” I protest. “And the new Guardian is the Fiain Academy Archon. I’d have no excuse for sniffing around her.”

Now, that makes a flash of surprise flick through her eyes. She gets in my face, her low snarl and the flash of her fangs making my heart start to pound, “Listen to me, girl… If the new Guardian is of the *Fiain* Academy, you’re in more serious trouble than I thought.”

Then she pulls away, seemingly seething.

For a second, I just blink at her. “I want you to tell me what happened,” I finally urge her, “what *really* happened a hundred and fifty six years ago.” I take a step closer, throwing my hands up in frustration. “Why are there so many conflicting stories and why the fuck are *you* in a painting?” I ask as I motion at the portrait to my right.

“It’s of no consequence whatsoever,” she spits out. “Just do as you’re told.”

“With *that* as an explanation?” I protest. Then I imitate her mockingly, “If the new Guardian is of the *Fiain* Academy, you’re in more serious trouble than I thought.”

For a second, she just looks at me, her eyes narrowing. “Are you all so whiny?”

My eyebrows pull down. “Pardon?”

“The children of your century,” she explains as she takes a step forward, tilting her head at me. “Are you *all* so whiny?”

“What the…”

This time, *she* imitates *me*, a mocking smile dancing on her lips as she twists her face in fake anguish. “I *know* it was bullshit, what he told me about his fox not liking noblewomen.”

It takes me a while to connect the dots, but when I finally do, I’m charging straight at her, “You used *Mind Magic* on me?”

She just folds her arms, quirking an eyebrow at me. “I did,” she replies flatly.

“You *do* understand that’s not okay?”

“Not okay?” she echoes with a mocking laugh. Then she turns serious. “There are far worse things in the world, girl, than someone using Mind Magic to find out you’re fretting about some boy. Should I add ‘ignorant’ to your being whiny?”

Hot blood rushes to my cheeks. “You should mind your own fucking business,” I drawl angrily, “that’s what you should do.”

“Let me think about it,” she says, pretending to do it. “After fighting tooth and nail to usher in an era of *true* strength for our family, after seizing absolute power for myself despite everything and everyone, and after ruling our lands for longer than any man or woman before me…”

She pauses to throw me a warning look. “My progeny showing all the signs of stupidity and spinelessness… I’d say that *is* my own fucking business.”

Stupidity and spinelessness? For a second, I find myself unable to speak. Then, when I do, I’m so angry, I end up stuttering through gritted teeth, “Well, you’re a fucking painting, so…”

And I turn on my heel and I move for the door, hearing a little chuckle from behind my back.

“And you’re spineless and you’ll do exactly as you’re told anyway,” she says, right before I slam the door on her.

But once I’m in my room, I proceed to do nothing other than proving her point, throwing daggers at the chic yet *large* red bow adorning the corset, but still putting on the overly elaborate dress Mother picked out for me.

*

The dinner drags on, so by the time my driver is pulling up in front of Lilith Tower, it’s already eleven o’clock.

And both Hilde and Nikolay ducked out almost as soon as it started, and my feet are killing me, and I’m in the *worst* fucking mood, but I force

myself to throw him a smile when he comes to open the door for me. "Thanks, Wolfgang," I say as I get myself out. "Have a good night."

"You too, Lady Romanov."

I hear him get back inside and start the engine, the car gliding away from me, but I'm already walking, my eyes fixed ahead and my mind buzzing.

I don't get very far. As soon as I see them, I stop midstep. Two figures walking out of the shadow cast by the Tower in front of me.

My eyebrows pull down.

They both come to a stop before me, a nearby lamp finally casting some light onto their faces.

"Can I help you?" I ask. They seem so familiar, I think with a growing frown, my fingers flexing to grab my knife.

"Yes," the left one starts, the touch of nervousness in his voice taking me by surprise. "Um… Lady—"

"*Miss* Romanov," the right one cuts in, slightly annoyed.

It makes me finally put the name to the faces.

The O'Malley brothers.

"Nyx is fine," I say, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Well," the nervous one starts, a piece of paper in his hands, "we're here to tell you…"

And he hesitates again.

"Right now," the annoyed one cuts in again, snatching the paper from him, "down at the camp, there are the following Grimm Academy event regulations being broken."

That makes me frown, but he just looks down at the paper and starts reading. "Article four, article five, article seven—"

It finally hits me and I jump straight in, my eyes narrowing. "Howe sent you, didn't he?"

The nervous one rushes to answer. "He did, Lady—"

But the annoyed one just jabs him in the elbow. "Will you shut it?" he hisses in a low voice. "He said to read 'em *all*." Then he clears his throat and turns to face me again with the paper in front of him. "Article thirteen —"

I shake my head in frustration. "Well," I cut in again, "you can tell Howe to go fuck off."

And I move to walk around them, regulations be damned, when I hear the annoyed one just keep going, "Article twenty one—"

It makes me stop midstep and turn back to them. "*Twenty one*?" I demand, my hands balling into fists. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

And without so much as a moment of hesitation, I start marching straight to the camp, the two brothers tailing me in silence.

*

It does come as a little surprise, when I start approaching the plateau and see how festive it all looks. There are fires lit everywhere, wreaths of flowers adorning all the wooden posts and people gathered in cheerful little groups, drinking and laughing.

But it's not the party I'm here for. So I motion for the brothers to take me to Howe and I follow them to the largest group of people around the largest fire.

And there he is, standing with his back turned to me, but almost as soon as my eyes fix on them, he throws a look over his shoulder and spots me.

His mouth cracking into a grin, he says something to the guy to his left, patting him on the back. Then he turns on his heel, walks out of the circle and drawls, "Who do we have here?"

Fucker. But he doesn't let me answer. He dismisses the brothers with a quick nod and turns back to me, leaning a little to say, "I thought you said I'd be seeing whoever the fuck I want, *except* for you."

"Oh shut it," I drawl. "Where are the fireworks? Don't you know they could anger the mermaids?"

He blinks at me, feigning innocence. "Oh, sorry about that. Did I forget to inform you we *won't* be breaking any of those regulations after all?"

For a second, I just throw daggers at him. "You fucker," I finally say, but then I see his eyes dart to my fucking bow and I frown.

There's a split second of silence before he lets out a little snicker.

"*What* are you looking at?" I demand, blood rushing to my cheeks.

"Nothing, sorry," he rushes to say, stifling a laugh. "I mean, I did tell people to dress up a little so you wouldn't stand out as much, you know, arriving from your fancy party." He gestures at the bow, his face beaming with amusement. "But *this*…"

Snap his neck. I want to snap his fucking neck. "I'm leaving," I spit out and I turn to walk away.

He appears in front of me, making me stop midstep. And there's this playful urgency in his voice when he leans in to say, "Not unless you want me to tell everyone why this is such a special, *special* day."

I pull away to shoot him a look that's both angry and a little bit concerned.

"Kidding, just kidding," he rushes to say as he takes a step back, raising his hands in defense. "I'll be taking it to the grave," he adds in a somber voice.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

He clears his throat. "Come on, stay a while," he says as he motions at a point behind my back.

I throw a glance over my shoulder, hearing him say, "Look, your brother and your cousin are already here."

And there they are, standing in a large group of people around a nearby fire, with drinks in their hands and glows of excitement on their faces.

Well… They do seem like they're having fun.

I hear Dahrian clear his throat and I turn to look at him again. He's holding a whiskey out for me, smiling again. "Here, a welcome drink before I get out of your hair."

I squint at him. Then I accept the glass and I take a sip. "Just this one," I say, letting out a content sigh as I feel the pleasant burning in my throat.

"Sure," he drawls as if he doesn't believe me, the smile dancing on his lips making me feel a little rush of excitement. "Have fun."

And he gives me a little wink. A *wink*.

I roll my eyes at him, but I do smile.

I watch him turn and go back to his group, finding myself hesitating. What the fuck am I doing?

Then I see the girl with the highlights standing in the same circle as him and I feel this pang shoot through my core.

Half an hour won't hurt, I decide as my mind starts buzzing. And I make myself turn on my heel and head straight to my brother and Hilde.

But I barely take a single step before I hear someone call out, "Miss Romanov."

And I stop and I turn around to see Ricky walking up to me, throwing me a warm smile.

*

I set my glass on a nearby table and I throw the nerdy little shifter a smile back, saying, "Didn't I already tell you to call me Nyx?"

For a second, he just blinks at me. Then he remembers and he runs his hand through his hair, letting out a little laugh. "Yeah, I guess it slipped my

mind."

"Being kept in a dungeon for a crime you didn't commit will do that to you," I say, not without hesitation.

I breathe a sigh of relief when he reacts with an awkward, but amused laugh.

"But you seem to be the only one not confused by the etiquette," I tell him, referring to him knowing that, being a student here, I don't need to be addressed as Lady by others at the Academy.

It takes him a second to connect the dots. "Ah yes," he says once he does. He smiles and then says, matter-of-factly, "I've spent a lot of time studying my family's history. And they're royal as well."

Now, that makes my eyebrows shoot up. "Really?"

"Yes, I'm an orphan," he adds. Then he waves his hand as if in an apology. "If you don't mind me being so blunt, of course."

A pang of sympathy shooting through me, I vigorously shake my head. "No, not at all."

He gives me a cute little smile. "Thank you. So yes, I've no family to speak of, but this is the sigil of my family line."

And he shows me his cufflinks, engraved with something so complex, I can't make out a single element.

"Sorry," I say, shaking my head in apology. "Not familiar with it."

He lets out an awkward little laugh and scratches himself on the head. "Well, *Nyx*," he says, peering into my eyes in this really endearing way, "I'm actually here because your brother has put me in an awkward position."

My eyebrows pull down. "What did he do?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that," he says with a wave of his hand. "He's given me *this*…"

And he rummages through his pocket, producing an expensive looking fountain pen. "And he won't let me refuse it."

He puts it back in his pocket and scratches his head again, squinting at me with embarrassment clearly written on his face. "So now I have to come up with a gift for a duke on the budget of a church mouse."

It makes me want to hug him. I contain myself, but my voice is still a lot softer when I say, "Seriously, don't bother. Nikolay has everything he could ever possibly want for."

I hesitate for a second before I say, “Besides, he loves giving people stuff. It makes him happy.” For a second, I remember the way he *used* to be — considerate, protective, loving. Now he reserves that for others. When did it all turn to shit, I wonder. But I make myself snap out of it.

“So,” I tell Ricky, “if you want to say thanks, take him for a night out or something.”

“Thanks, Nyx,” he replies with a smile and a nod. “You’re really kind.”

I let out a little laugh. “Not something people often tell me.”

He throws me a warm smile and says, “I’ll be out of your hair now. Have fun.”

I nod, but it’s at that moment that I hear Dahrian’s voice sound from my right and my eyes dart to his circle, where I see the girl with the highlights standing quite a bit closer to him.

And I reach out my hand to stop Ricky just as he moves to walk away. “No, hey, Ricky…”

He stops, blinking at me in anticipation.

“Why don’t you have a drink with me?” I suggest with a smile. I motion at the circle my brother and cousin are standing in. “I’m not too eager to listen to my brother talk about video games,” I say with an awkward little laugh. Then I add, putting an effort into sounding nonchalant, “And I’d be curious to hear how today’s training went for you.”

Ricky throws me a knowing little smile that makes my heart skip a beat.

“Keep your enemies close?” he asks.

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Something like that,” I say with a conspiratorial wink.

He laughs. “Well, wouldn’t matter either way.” And he motions for me to join him at the nearest empty table. “I’m far from the strongest in the pack,” he starts as soon as I do. “In *my* case, training means getting to know the pack’s behavior better so I can support them in combat as best I can.”

I nod, but that’s not what interests me. “I’m guessing *Howe* would be the strongest,” I say flatly.

“Look at *you*,” Ricky drawls, throwing me another knowing smile. “Working on some diabolical plan?”

I let out a laugh. “Always.” And I anxiously wait for the answer.

“Of course he’s the strongest,” Ricky says simply, “he’s the alpha for a reason.”

But that doesn't get me any closer to the answer I'm really looking for. "Yeah," I start, a little hesitantly. "But I saw his fox today and something about it sparked my curiosity. It seems… *more* than strong." I wave my hand in an apology. "Sorry, I don't know how else to put it. And of course, feel free not to answer," I rush to add, understanding what I'm asking.

"Not a secret really," he says with a shake of his head. Then he lets out a little laugh. "I mean, I know for a fact that *everyone* who bet on the Games already has this info, which makes for a hell of a lot of people."

I smile, but he quickly turns serious. "And I know exactly what you mean when you say *more than strong*."

It makes me hold my breath, the possibility that he's actually about to answer my question.

"So," he starts, getting instantly engrossed and making me lean a little forward, "every shifter has two sides to him or her, one human and one animal."

I nod. "Of course."

"We all know, deep inside our bones," he continues, passionately, "that this bond should never be severed. There's, like, this really strong gut feeling at the very thought of it being destroyed. But it's not the same task for everyone."

"What do you mean?"

He shakes his head. "Some shifters are born with animal souls that are older than others." Shrugging his shoulders, he admits, "No one really knows how these things work, but it's still a fact. And the older the soul, the harder it is to keep under control."

"Let me guess," I cut in, squinting at him a little, "Dahrian's fox has an old soul."

"Yes," he says in a somber voice. "I believe it's the main reason he got chosen for an alpha at such an early age."

And that's all fine, I think to myself. *Still*, it doesn't answer my question. "It's dangerous though?" I dare to ask, just not about Dahrian in particular. "So shifters like that sometimes have to keep their animals away from people?"

Ricky thinks for a second. "Not Dahrian," he replies with a shake of his head. "I mean, it *was* true, when I said he didn't have it easy. But this has also forced him to become better than most. And if he didn't show great

control," he keeps saying with absolute conviction, "they never would've picked him to lead the pack."

"I see," I say, forcing a normal voice. So I was right, I think to myself, when I thought the reason I was given today was bullshit.

And I dare to throw a single glance back at his circle, only to see the girl with highlights now standing right next to him. "Well, good for him," I add as I turn back to Ricky, fighting a sinking feeling.

I find Ricky looking at him as well. "Yeah," he says, seeming to be caught up in some kind of pensive admiration. "It's the best thing a man can possibly have. The ability to protect his own from whatever harm may befall them."

For a second, I just look at him. And I find myself wanting to leave the party, this coldness growing inside me. But when he turns to look at me again, throwing me another warm smile, I get the need to at least make it so this ends on a positive note for *him*.

So I lean in, I give a smile back and I ask, "Tell me, Ricky, how're you liking it here, *really*?"

And I watch his mouth crack into a grin, but it's at that exact moment that I hear Nikolay bellow, "Hey, sis, over here."

*

I'm on my fourth whiskey, standing in a circle around a fire with Ricky to my left, Nikolay to his and Hilde standing across from us, chatting with one of the O'Malley brothers. I myself am trying my hardest to listen to Ricky talk about, as he says, the *coolest* professor he ever had.

But my mind keeps wandering, aimlessly and hopelessly.

I haven't seen or heard him in, like, forever. I'm starting to think he's no longer at the party, which, in turn, has me obsessing over where he *is*.

Forcing myself to snap out of it, I tune back in just as Ricky says, "And *that's* when he decided he wouldn't be teaching anymore."

"Wow," I say, feeling burning shame for not actually listening, "what a story."

It's then that I realize I really don't want to be here anymore.

"It *is* a good one, yeah," Ricky replies with excitement written all over his face.

Then he pauses to look deeper into my eyes. "But you see," he adds with a knowing smile, "despite the fact you now know I'm of royal blood, you really don't have to be sucking up to me like this."

Now, that actually makes me let out a laugh.

"I'm just gonna run to the bathroom," he says with a smile.

And at the same time my nose fills with a certain scent, his eyes dart to a point behind my back.

I watch him give a little wave with a grin from ear to ear and I freeze, knowing exactly who it is he's just waved to.

And it makes me want to beg him to stay, but he just throws me another smile and leaves for the bathroom.

I find myself standing next to Nikolay, who's showing something on his phone to a guy to his left. And I have to force myself to look over my shoulder. Where, of course, I see His Hotness strolling over with his hands in his pockets. And I can't hear it over the music, but I can tell he's whistling.

Fuck, I think as I turn back. The only thing worse than him not being here at all…

I take my phone out of my clutch and I busy myself with checking my messages, but now I'm starting to hear the whistling, and it just keeps drawing closer until it's almost in my ear.

It makes me frown, when it stops and I feel him come to stand next to me. *Me*, of all the fucking spots in the circle.

I look up to throw him a warning look, reminding him of the addendum to the rules, aka keeping the interactions in public to a minimum. But he just looks down at me, intently, with this smirk on his lips, not taking his hands out of his pockets but shrugging his shoulders a little as if to say, "I'm not doing anything, am I?"

My eyes narrow, but it's then that the guy next to him notices him as well.

"There you are, Boss," I hear him say, giving him a clap on the shoulder.

And Dahrian turns away from me, without so much as a word, and starts exchanging hellos and little comments with the rest of the group.

I take a deep breath. It's fine, this is fine.

And just as I look to my brother, hoping I'll be able to just join in his conversation, said brother turns to throw me a grin and gets his phone in my face, saying, "Look what they're making it do."

I fix my eyes on the screen, frowning when I see it's a video of some kids using Mind Magic on some poor unsuspecting cat.

I open my mouth to say it's just *not* okay, that they're watching this, when I feel a little bump into my right side. My body tingles and my head

snaps to shoot Howe another warning look.

I find him already looking at me. “Sorry, am I stepping on the lady’s dress?” he asks with a little smirk.

I squint at him, realizing that that intensity I saw in his eyes a moment ago is actually him being a little tipsy.

“It’s fine,” I say, grumpily, and I turn away without waiting for a reaction.

I hear a little snicker, but I’m already fixing my eyes back on the screen in my chuckling brother’s hands.

But my mind’s not even registering the video so I pull away. I should just leave, I think as my body keeps forcing me to stay focused on a certain someone’s proximity.

“Look,” my brother practically yells as one of the students on the video makes the cat take a theatrical little bow.

For a second, I just look at his childishly lit-up face. And I roll my eyes and blow a laugh through my nose, thinking this is as good a moment to excuse myself from the party as it’ll ever be.

But it’s then that I feel a breath on my neck and I stiffen, hearing Howe ask in a low, teasing voice, “Does that little laugh mean you’re having fun?”

My eyes dart to Hilde, who’s immersed in her own conversation, but still, standing right across from us.

I pull away, I turn to look at him and I say, making a point of using a loud, formal voice, “I *am* having fun, thank you.”

His eyes narrow. “Thank you?” he leans to echo in a voice that’s barely above a whisper. “Never thought I’d hear you say those words.”

I pull away again. “And now you have,” I say, forcing that same flatness into my voice.

“So formal,” he whispers. “Breaks my heart.”

I shoot him a nasty look, subtly tipping my head to where Hilde’s standing. “Sorry to hear that,” I say, through gritted teeth but managing to keep my voice flat. “I’m sure it’ll get better soon.”

But that only brings an urgency to his voice when he leans to hum in my ear, “Not so formal when you have your legs around me.”

And I feel his fingers wrap around the fabric of my dress, just below my waist, and give it a sharp little tug, making my hip bump into his.

Quickly, I pull away so we’re not touching, but it makes my ears burn, when my eyes dart to Hilde and I see her looking at us, a little frown scrunching up her face.

And she almost immediately looks away, but my ears are still burning and now, it feels as if *everyone* could hear him. And I fail to stop myself. This time, it's me who leans in, demanding through gritted teeth, "Stop it, alright? You're drawing attention."

He pulls away, looking more amused than anything.

But to my surprise, he turns to the guy to his right and whispers something in his ear.

Frowning, I watch the guy's face light up and I witness the little whisper spreading like wildfire, making the whole circle in which I'm standing get a move on, seemingly headed straight for the makeshift bar.

The next thing I know, Nikolay is leaning to tell me, a spark in his eyes, "There's feywine being prepared for serving. If we leave right now, we could be first in line."

He doesn't wait for my reaction. He slides his phone into his pocket and starts leading his new friend to the bar.

I turn to Dahrian, who's giving me a self-satisfied little smile.

"Isn't feywine, like, super strong?" I demand.

But I already have his hand on my lower back, and he's practically pushing me in the direction opposite the one everyone else went in, down the rickety wooden stairs leading off the plateau.

"Hey," I say as I throw a glance at him over my shoulder.

But I'm already getting off the lowest step and down onto the ground.

"There," he says as he appears in front of me, staring into my eyes from up close. "Is *this* better?"

And he gives my bow a little tug. "Anyone seen *that*?"

And the tone of his voice is making my stupid skin flush, but I roll my eyes at him and I take a step back. "I don't care."

He gets even closer, his body practically pressed against mine, does another little tug and when I raise my hands to push him away, he grabs me by the waist and asks, "How about *that*?"

I shoot him a look that makes him let out a little laugh, let go of me and take a step back, raising his hands in defense.

"Come on," he says as he motions at the lake, "take a walk with me."

I find myself hesitating, but then I give him a smile and motion for him to lead the way.

"So, how was the dinner?" he asks when we start walking side by side. "Any attendees I'd know, besides your brother and cousin?"

The question makes me frown a little, but I dismiss it. “You wouldn’t believe it,” I say, a touch of frustration in my voice, “but my mother actually dared invite Max.”

“Yeah?” he asks, all serious all of a sudden.

“Fortunately for everyone there,” I continue, “he had to excuse himself to go to an urgent audience with the King.”

“So let me get this straight,” he says, a touch of mockery in his voice, “you are *not*, in fact, begging him to take you back?”

I don’t stop walking, but I do turn to throw daggers at him.

He shrugs. “Had to, sorry. Just heard the rumor, it’s fresh in my mind.”

“Yours and everybody else’s,” I snap a little.

There’s a moment of silence before he asks, “But seriously, how was the dinner? Come on, paint the peasant a picture.”

That makes me blow a laugh through my nose. “Easy,” I drawl, rolling my eyes at the very thought of it all. “Bite-sized food on enormous plates, forced smiles and talk of politics that never seems to go anywhere simply because, well,” I say, finding myself in the middle of a rant, “that would mean the scum actually *cares* about stuff, now wouldn’t it?”

He laughs. “Why don’t you do something about it?”

“Yeah, I should just kill them all and be done with it, right?” I say pensively, thinking about a certain Vasilisa and *her* methods.

“Well, didn’t have anything like *that* in mind, but…”

“*Well*, it’s either that or playing by *their* fucking rules, which… is just...”

“Just what?”

“It means a lot of things I don’t want.”

“Like what?”

“Like getting a couple of weeks to rethink breaking off the engagement.”

There’s a moment of silence before he asks, “So you’re not *begging*, but you are *rethinking*? What’s the difference?”

It makes me throw him a frown, this bitterness in his voice. Judging me. Is he *judging* me?

“Well,” I start, fighting not to show my frustration, “excuse me for finding myself in an impossible predicament. Entirely my own fault, of course,” I rush to add. “I *know* they won’t let me have anything unless I get married, yet I go ahead and break up the best possible match for myself.”

“So, you’re actually *sorry* you broke up with Prince Charming?” he demands.

“Of course not,” I blurt out, surprised that he’d think that. “You’re missing my point.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

It all leaves me a little confused. So there’s a second of silence before he kicks a rock with his boot and then another one before he asks, his tone softer and a little teasing once again, “Did you score any good presents? Diamond-encrusted weapons to kill the attendees with?”

But my mind is still on his reaction to what I said and right now, it’s starting to really hit me, and *bother* me, how little I know about him.

So just as we get close to a little grove near the Grimm Tower, I stop and I turn to face him, making him stop as well. “So there’s nothing about my situation you’re able to understand?” I ask, earnestly.

For a second, he just throws me that fucking squint of his. Then he shrugs and says, simply, “I just know that there are people who play by the rules and people who make them. Thought you said you wanted to be among the latter.” He shrugs again. “So be among the latter.”

It makes me raise my eyebrows at him. “Are you for real?” I ask, making him frown at me. “I mean, it’s hard to imagine someone breezing through life like that. Is it really all just throwing parties you don’t file the paperwork for,” I ask, finding myself a little breathless, “and fooling around with a whole harem of women at any given time?”

For a moment, we just look at each other.

“How did you know?” he finally whispers, making my eyebrows pull down. “I have to make a confession, Romanov,” he says with a shake of his head, a mocking little smile tugging at his lips, “I’ve never felt this seen before.”

I have to fight not to let out a frustrated groan. Instead, I just shake my head and move to walk back to the camp.

“Whoa,” I hear him say, with a laugh, as he grabs me by the wrist, “where do you think you’re going?”

I turn to throw him an incredulous look and I break my hand free of his grip, deciding it was so fucking stupid of me to get caught up in this little mystery that is Dahrian Howe in the first place. “We should be getting back,” I tell him.

Not angrily. Not bitterly. Flatly.

He tilts his head at me, as if he's actually taken aback. "Come on," he protests as he gets a little closer, "what did I do?"

"Nothing," I say with a shrug, but I take a step back. "I just think it's time to get back to the party."

For a second, his eyes narrow, but then he seems to snap out of it. "Yeah, sure," he says, simply, moving to go with me.

But just as I turn on my heel, he adds, "In a minute."

And he takes my hand and starts leading me back, straight to the grove.

"Hey, what're you doing?" I demand, but this mix of curiosity and excitement makes me follow, practically running to catch up with him.

"*We,"* he says without looking back at me, "are getting me a present for your birthday."

"Getting *you* a present?" I demand, throwing daggers at his back. "For *my* birthday?"

"Exactly," he replies, matter-of-factly, just as we enter the grove.

Then he stops, abruptly, and swings me around so I come bumping into him, his eyes already on mine.

"And look," he says in a low, teasing voice, making my breath hitch when he slides one hand around my waist and starts tugging at the bow with the other, "it comes so beautifully wrapped. A little over the top, but I love it, thank you."

I pry his hand off the bow, but there's this intense flutter in my chest and a tightness in my throat as I say, "You're being ridiculous."

He slides the other hand around my waist and pulls me tighter against himself, making me lose my breath when I feel the hardness of his muscles. His eyes narrowing, he throws me a little smirk before he whispers, "Oh I think I know when I'm being ridiculous and this is *not* it, please and thank you."

I roll my eyes, but I'm burning up and my voice is breathless when I say, "Well, you're an idiot either way."

There's a flash of hunger in his eyes. "*That* I am."

And my eyes dart to his lips, and he catches the glance and moves to kiss me on the mouth.

That snaps me out of it and I turn my face away from his, feeling his lips brush my cheek. "Nope," I say with a breathy laugh, realizing what I was about to let happen. "*No* spontaneous meetups. Those are the rules." And I try to pull away.

He doesn't let me. "It's not spontaneous at all," he protests with such conviction in his husky voice. "I *told* you I'd be seeing you tonight, now didn't I?"

And he moves for my neck this time, his breath stroking my skin as he murmurs, "Choosing not to believe me, that's on *you*."

Well… How can I argue with *that*?

It makes me suck in a sharp breath when he takes a little bite out of my neck. My body tingling with desire, I let him untie the bow with a swift movement of one hand.

I feel the corset loosening, but it's the very next moment that he gives its bottom a sharp tug with both hands, arms wrapping tightly around me as the mouth finds its way to my left breast and closes around it, the tongue starting to tease my nipple in the most delicious way imaginable.

My breathing turns ragged and my eyes close. "Mmm," I hum as I grab onto his shoulders, tightly.

At that, he lets out a little groan, one hand flying to my ass and making me go all wet, dying to get his tongue someplace else.

Fuck. I guess I'm doing this, I think to myself, my mind already going blank with desire. And if I am…

I squirm to pull away, making him look up at me with glazed eyes and a frown.

"On your knees," I tell him, and it makes me lose my breath, when I see the look in his eyes become even more intense and he starts lowering himself to the ground without taking them off me.

Guess it won't be such a bad birthday after all, I think as I listen to the rustling of my dress as he gets under it.

It makes my spine arch, when I feel the hands stroke my thighs and close around my ass. But it's the anticipation alone that sends my heart racing even before I feel that deft, deft tongue on my aching, aching clit.

Chapter 22 - Dahrian

I'm still panting, but as soon as I finish, she starts pushing me out of her, her legs still wrapped around me as I hold her pinned to the tree with my forehead resting on her temple. And I get myself out, but I don't let her down. And I give her zero time to snap out of it, immediately starting to bite her neck and squeeze her where she likes to be squeezed, to distract her from what I'm about to do.

Swallowing roughly, I sneak a hand between us and I start using my thumb to rub her, excitement flooding me when I hear her breathing start getting heavy again.

Fuck. Is this actually happening?

Her smell in my nose and her taste in my mouth, I keep working her with my fingers, listening to her panting turning into moaning and feeling my dick start throbbing again.

There's one long, delicious moment of this before my fox's ears prick up.

The next thing I know, there's a familiar voice calling, "Nyx."

"Quick," I hear her say, panic in her voice. I have to fight not to let out a frustrated groan as she squirms to get me off her. "That's Hilde."

No shit, I drawl to myself as I help get her down.

As usual, you can't even get fifteen minutes alone with this girl.

But I keep my mouth shut, zipping my pants up, sliding my hands into my pockets and proceeding to watch the jumpy little rabbit struggle to get

her elaborate dress in order.

"Need any help?" I ask, my mouth curling into a smile.

She shushes me, finishes fixing her corset and starts marching out of the grove, gesturing for me to follow.

And I do, but I first grab her ribbon off the ground. Fighting the urge to whistle, I fall into step with her just as she walks out from among the trees.

Still moving, I hold the ribbon out for her, but then I see Hilde walking straight at us, waving, and I slide my hand back into my pocket, concealing the incriminating little item.

I see Romanov wave back, throw a quick glance at her chest and let out a quiet little groan. "Where's the fucking… Fuck."

It makes me have to stifle a laugh just as we meet her cousin halfway.

"*There* you are," Hilde says, but she doesn't wait for a reply. She immediately turns to *me*. "Hi, Dahrian," she says, sweetly, but there's some kind of pause in her voice.

"Hello to you, too," I say, unfazed, smiling and tipping my head in a greeting.

"What're you two doing?" she asks, without hesitation but with a little frown now scrunching up her forehead.

"Oh," Romanov jumps in, making me turn to see what she'll come up with, "I was just showing Howe the spot where that gargoyle attacked that student, remember, our first year here?"

Would you look at that, I think as my mouth cracks into a smile.

"But that's not the grove where it happened," I hear Hilde say.

I don't take my eyes off Romanov.

"What're you talking about, Hilde?" she protests with a scoff. "I think I'd know."

Such conviction, I think as my smile turns into a grin.

"So you've seen the marks on the trees?" Hilde asks just as I turn to her, finding her no longer looking so suspicious.

For a second, I just look at her. Then I clear my throat to suppress a laugh. "Of course," I say, my voice coming out all collected and serious, "it was all so fascinating." I let my eye dart to the jumpy little rabbit as I say, "I enjoyed the little lecture *immensely*."

She subtly rolls her eyes at me, but her lips are tugging into a smile, which is the look she has on whenever she tells me I'm an idiot.

It makes me start getting hard again.

"No, it really *is* fascinating," I hear Hilde say and I turn to look at her, but it's proving to be hard not to hate her for interrupting.

"Yeah, he's just being polite," Romanov protests, making me snap out of it. "But we have to go, don't we, Hilde?"

And she takes her cousin by the hand and moves to walk away, throwing me a look that's telling me I better start making myself scarce.

"Yeah, Nikolay's already left," Hilde replies with a sigh as she lets herself be led away. "He had a little too much of that feywine." She stops, throwing a glance over her shoulder, at me. "But we can't leave Dahrian all alone out here."

"I don't think he needs a babysitter," comes a cutting reply.

I blow a little laugh through my nose. "You two run along. Good night," I say, tipping my head to the side a little to catch a certain rabbit's eye. "And sweet dreams."

"Night," she says flatly.

"Bye, Dahrian," Hilde says sweetly. "Sweet dreams to you, too."

For a second, I just keep standing there, watching them start making their way across the gardens and back to Lilith Tower.

Then I turn on my heel, sliding the hand with the ribbon out of my pocket at the exact same moment I hear Hilde's already distant voice say, "Nyx, where's your bow?"

"Um, there was this branch… Nevermind. I just lost it."

I keep strolling down the slope, snickering, my thumb stroking the smooth surface of the fabric between my fingers.

"You know what happened while you were gone?" I hear Hilde say, her voice getting fainter and fainter. "Remember that Annika girl, from Mind Magic Level One?"

Romanov says something, but I can no longer hear her.

Still smiling, I fix my eyes on the fires at the camp down below, I breathe in a lungful of crisp, winter air and I start whistling.

Of course, it's at that exact moment that I hear *him*.

So that's how it is now? he demands as he rises out of the shadows. *She tells you 'You're an idiot' and you start drooling like a fucking Pavlov dog?*

I raise my eyebrows at him, but I remain unfazed. "*And*? More often than not," I tell him as my mouth cracks into a lazy grin, "when she says it, I actually *do* get a treat. So can you blame me?"

It's pathetic, he snaps at me. *Makes me ashamed to be your animal.*

“Oh fuck off,” I drawl with a self-satisfied laugh, “you’re just jealous. You want me to let you out so you can do *your* thing.”

Well, he insists, clearly butthurt, *you’re not keeping the ribbon.*

“*Well*,” I counter, “as you yourself *ordered* me, I’m not letting you anywhere near her.” My grin only growing wider and my voice more mocking, I tell him, “So sure, I’ll let you bitch about the ribbon however much you want.”

Hey, he warns, his own voice turning cold and threatening. *You better watch it, boy.*

Fuck.

“I’m sorry,” I rush to say as I start approaching the plateau, realizing I really am acting like a jerk. I make myself snap out of it, clearing my throat. “I’ll behave. And of course I won’t keep the ribbon,” I add as I look down at it. “I’ll just hold onto it for her.”

He doesn’t say anything. He just squints at me suspiciously.

“I’m being serious,” I insist, making sure my voice matches the sentiment. “I told you she wouldn’t be a distraction and look, she’s not. She came, we had a little roll in the hay and now it’s back to the party.”

Look at you, he drawls. *All smart all of a sudden.*

“Well, I’m determined. We have the Third Game tomorrow, and I’m going to show you exactly how inconsequential all this really is.”

For a second, he stays silent. *I sincerely hope so,* he finally says, a little coldly, but clearly appeased.

*

The next morning, I find myself in the crowd with Ricky, leaving the Dame Gothel statue behind and seemingly going south. And despite the fact that the Third Game hasn’t even started yet, I’m feeling downright victorious. We only have ten players left, but they're strong ones, Aine with her wolf and Lorcan with his bear having proven to be real assets.

“Did you know there’ll be burgers after?” I ask my friend with a grin. “I was worried they’d be bringing out those fancy appetizers again.”

“Glad you can think about food right now,” my friend tells me, unease written clearly on his face. “I myself can’t be so sure I haven’t already had my last meal.”

“Come on,” I protest, glancing around to see we’re walking along the camp, “it’s not like you’re about to die. You’ll probably just get injured a little. *Maybe* lose a limb or two.”

It's scandalized, the look he throws me.

It makes me let out a little laugh. But I quickly turn serious. "Hey," I tell him with a pat on his back, "you're stronger and more resourceful than you think."

He waves a hand in dismissal. "How come you're with *me*?" he asks, frowning a little. "I got rid of *my* buddy ages ago, but I thought Nikolay was still yours."

"Seems his mommy doesn't want him to be," I reply with an amused laugh.

"Oh well," my friend says absently, "can't please everyone. But maybe it's for the best. So far, that family's only meant trouble for you."

I open my mouth to reply, but it's just at that moment that I spot Romanov in the crowd, walking with her brother, clad in that tight little uniform.

I feel a rush of heady thrill as I let my eyes drag down her body. And I keep putting one foot in front of the other, but it's all I can think about now. How would it be received, I wonder, if I sent her a text to meet me after the Game, telling her to wear it?

Or should I risk not ending up seeing her at all and try catching her at the party tonight? Little miss doesn't seem to be *that* hung up on rules, I think with a smile as my mind rushes back to our little rendezvous in the grove last night.

After all, she didn't even bother calling me out for that bullshit about it not being spontaneous at all.

Though there are *some* rules she seems adamant about sticking to.

No kissing on the mouth, for example.

And just as she disappears back into the crowd, I realize I could ask Ricky to educate me a little. He'd know, I'm sure of it.

Still walking along the camp, I turn back to him and I ask, "Coming to the party tonight?"

He shoots me a nasty look. "I can't even think about eating, *ever again*," he bitches, "and you're asking me about a party?"

I have to stifle a laugh. "What if I help distract you a little?"

He throws me another look, still grumpy but intrigued.

"I'll take that as a yes," I say with a little laugh. "So it's about the party tonight. I'm thinking of meeting up with this girl."

"Yeah?" he asks, his eyebrows pulling down in confusion.

“Vampire girl,” I say, a little theatrically.

He shrugs. “So?”

“So,” I start, “I’ve never gotten one, but I did hear about a lil’ something called the vampire’s kiss.”

To my surprise, Ricky lets out a laugh.

I frown at him.

“I don’t think you’d want that,” he says, simply. “It’s not the type of thing I’d recommend doing if you’re not into anything serious.”

“Yeah?” I ask, now even more curious than I was a moment ago. “How so?”

He thinks for a second. “It’s, like…” He waves his hands around a little, searching for words. “You get bitten on the lip, you lick each other’s blood, and it makes you feel both your own and your partner’s pleasure. I’ve heard it’s, well,” he says with an awkward little laugh, “a heady thing.”

“Mm.” I don’t stop walking, but I’m practically holding my breath as I keep glancing at him, waiting for him to continue.

“But it creates a stronger emotional connection as well,” he explains. “That’s why vampires won’t do it with just *anyone*.” He lets out a little laugh. “There are even traditionalists who save it for their wedding night.”

“Interesting,” I say as my mind goes around in circles trying to picture what it would be like.

“Yeah,” I hear Ricky reply just as the crowd starts slowing down, “so maybe don’t do that.”

“Yeah,” I say. It’s just that, now, it’s all I can think about. That, and whether she’s one of the so-called traditionalists.

“But thanks, Dahrian,” my friend snaps me out of it as we come to a stop. He looks a lot less mortified. “This actually helped get me out of my head a little.”

I give him a smile and a clap on the back.

And I turn to look at where they’ve brought us.

What the…

We’re standing in front of the lake, one set of bleachers set up along the shore to our left and one to our right. Will *this* be the arena for today, I think as my eyebrows pull down.

“Will they actually be making us fight underwater?” I hear Ricky ask, concern in his voice. “Lycan have mercy on us.”

“That about sums it up,” I say, in the most serious voice of the day.

And sure, due to orders from the Boss, I was planning on avoiding shifting altogether. Still, I hoped to at least have the option.

But there's no time for ruminating. The crowd is already parting to let us players through, and there's the Archon, standing in front of the lake, her chair behind her, and holding the Box in her hands with a somber look on her face.

It's too early to be so worried, my fox's voice booms inside my head as I lead Ricky down the path, a couple of pairs of players behind Romanov and her brother. *We still don't know what the Box will come up with.*

"Well, don't blame me for not holding my hopes up," I tell him.

Once we're all lined up on the shore and my pack's buddies have all taken their leave, the Archon clears her throat and motions for the Pied Piper and Gleason — who's replaced her as our Academy's representative — to shake hands to activate the Box. Once they do, retreating to take their seats in the bleachers, she gets Hourglass out and flings it in the air.

The next thing I know, there's an island rising out of the center of the lake and a bridge shooting out of it, producing a thunderous thud when it connects with the mainland.

Then, for a second, there's only silence. I hold my breath as I watch Hourglass flip over and the sand start running.

I frown, my eyes darting left right, expecting creatures to populate either the island or the water.

Instead, I see the air above the lake get thick and the subsequent fog turn a menacing green shade.

My head snaps to the Archon, but she's already taken her seat, her back now turned to me and her eyes fixed on the lake in front of her.

And just like that, the players start moving. My eyes get drawn to Romanov, but she's already walking with her eyes fixed on the lake.

I force myself to tear them away and start approaching the water myself.

*

For one long moment, we all keep standing at the shore, waiting in almost complete silence, only broken by a low murmur coming from the audience and the wind playing with the reefs.

Then one of the girls, a Grimm, takes a hesitant step towards the bridge and stops.

My eyes narrow.

For a second, she keeps standing there, then takes a step back.

But the next thing I know, another one of the Grimms walks over to her and gives her a shove that could hardly be called gentle.

And she flies forward, only regaining her balance once her feet are already on the bridge.

I suck in a breath.

But seconds pass and nothing happens.

I watch the girl throw a glance over her shoulder, a surprised smile on her lips. Then she just starts walking, down the bridge and straight for the island, slowly picking up the pace.

Still, nothing happens.

Holding my breath, I keep observing and I think I notice her start slowing down, but just as I see her walk a third of the bridge, she comes to a stop and bends over a little, as if she's catching her breath.

Must be the fog, I think to myself. I don't know how she didn't realize it was way too soon to get her hopes up.

But what happens next still takes me by surprise. She stands straight and she keeps stumbling forward, but now her shoulders are shaking and her knees are giving out and she's producing this quiet little sob, making me grit my teeth in anticipation.

Then she stops, abruptly, making my heart skip a beat. And she turns around and she starts trying to walk back, obviously struggling as the quiet little sob turns into a pained wail.

My fists clenching, I keep my eyes fixed on her. And the wail turns into a deeply unsettling scream and the next thing I know…

She stops, she flings herself off the bridge and comes crashing into the water.

For a second, there's silence.

Then, the surface of the water being disturbed by some unseen fight, followed by streaks of blood lifting from down below.

Fuck, I curse with gritted teeth, even before there's that flash of light where the girl fell through, meaning she's been taken out of the Game.

But now… now everyone else seems to be getting a move on, including Romanov, her brother, the asshole prince and Ricky.

And some of them are leaping into the water and some wading into it, but they all seem to be choosing the underwater monsters instead of the unknown danger that is the bridge.

I watch Romanov start wading in, my mind buzzing as it tries to come up with as many possible scenarios.

It could be all manner of creatures, but for some reason…

I don't think it's anything other than what's already been in there, all this time.

I agree, I hear my fox say in a tense voice. *These have to be mermaids.*

A shiver runs down my spine at the very thought.

I think you better try going over, my fox says.

And I can't say I don't agree. We're not water creatures, my fox and I. And if it comes to it, we'll get in, but if we don't have to…

So instead of following the others, I walk up to the bridge, I take a deep breath and I start walking.

*

I literally feel it, when the fog starts seeping into my brain. Like neurons starting to fire in all the wrong ways.

All of a sudden, when I look up into the sky, I can't figure out whether it's daytime or nighttime. When I look down at my shoes, I can't tell how far away they are from me. And when my mind scrambles for an explanation, of what I'm supposed to do, of where I even am, it finds…

Nothing. A big black hole of nothing.

And I think I'm still walking, but now there are these things coming at me. Like apparitions.

There's a small boy, so small, it makes my heart ache, and he's withering somehow, I can see it, but I can't do anything about it.

Then there are these men, strange, evil men, and they have me in the palms of their hands and I know I'm going to lose because it's written in the stars.

And then, *then* there's this girl, and she's more like a ball of light, but if you saw her shadow, you'd see she has fangs and those fangs are about to rip into my throat and leave me lying on the ground, forever aching.

It's all making me want to scream at the top of my lungs, my mind scrambling to find a way out of it.

And just as the terror reaches a point I don't think I'll be able to bear for long, I feel a light breeze on my skin and I find *one* thing to hold onto.

The water. There is the water below me and somehow I know it'll make all this stop.

Desperate for relief, I move to throw myself into it.

But then there's this snarl that seems to come from both within and outside me, of an animal that feels so familiar and strange at the same time.

And then there's an image that makes me stop, of red mixing with blue-green, like blood with water.

So instead of jumping in, I sit down, I take a lungful of air and I let my body slide inside.

And just like that, the fog clears and I find myself underwater, my eyes adjusting to the near darkness and silence so total, it makes blood curdle in my veins.

*

Thanks to my fox, I don't attract any attention. I just start swimming, slowly, scanning my surroundings and scrambling to remember all the things they told me about mermaids when I was a kid.

Whatever you do, don't make any sudden movements. Check, I think to myself.

Try not to attract any attention at all. Probably won't be possible.

If you do, swim for your life.

Now, that probably won't get me any closer to finishing the Game. But there are no ways to deal with a mermaid underwater and get out alive.

So what the fuck am I supposed to do?

I turn my eyes upwards, at the shadow that is the bottom of the island. But it'll take me a while to get there and if I just keep swimming…

Well, not like there's anything else I can do right now. So I start moving.

But it's at that exact moment that I see a shape start forming in the water ahead of me. It's Romanov's brother and he's swimming in my direction, furiously and without spotting me.

He's too busy trying to get away from a shadow darting around him.

My heart tightens in my chest when I see the shadow block his way, its back turned to me as the slow wagging of its enormous fish tail keeps it in place.

And it grabs him by the wrist and makes him open his mouth in a silent cry of pain as it slowly twists the arm into an unnatural position.

For a second, I just keep swimming in place, staring at the creature's tangled hair falling down the scaly back and the muscled arm finishing in a clawed hand that's gripping Nikolay's wrist.

The next thing I know, it's tilting its head, revealing its spiked teeth to me as it lowers them to his neck.

Fuck. But just as instinct pushes me to move to help, I see Nikolay grimace and the mermaid snatch her hand away, its body starting to jerk left right, as if it got broken somehow.

Mind Magic, it occurs to me. He's trying to use Mind Magic on her.

Good, I think as I start swimming, making sure I'm leaving plenty of distance between myself and the ongoing fight.

And I keep heading straight for the island, making sure I never stop scanning my surroundings.

But it's so dark and blurry, that I don't realize where I'm headed until I'm literally entering the cave.

My heart skips a beat and I move to back the hell up, but there's already a pair of eyes watching me from the darkness ahead.

The next thing I know, I'm being slammed back, the mermaid already hovering above me, its cold eyes boring into mine.

It makes all the muscles in my body tense up in preparation. Then I grab her by the arm and I swing her around, making her fly through the water and the hell away from me.

And I start kicking upwards like crazy, feeling myself starting to lose my breath.

Near the surface, to my left, I spot something, a man in a tattered uniform, *Ricky*, just floating in the water with a smile on his face, his eyes gently closing, despite a mermaid making its way to him.

But I can sense the creature I'd just fought off as she closes the distance again and I power through the last of the water separating me from the surface.

I escape the mermaid, but I find myself grabbing the edge of the bridge again.

And I pull myself out, gasping for air, and I hoist myself over and throw myself on my back, panting and feeling disoriented from all the light and the noises.

I know I don't have a lot of time before the fog starts seeping into my brain again, so I turn my head to the shore, and there I see that a lot of the people are already out of the Game, including Nikolay.

But when I turn my head to the island, there's Ricky, dragging himself out of the water.

The very next second, I hear the gong mark the first point being scored.

And it suddenly dawns on me, how my friend managed to win.

*

Drown, I need to start drowning, I think to myself as I start remembering what Ricky told me about mermaids.

So I slide myself back into the water and I let my eyes readjust to the near darkness, but then I simply keep floating there, trying to let go despite the overwhelming instinct not to.

But it's at the very next moment that I think I spot Romanov being chased somewhere in the distance, by a shadow a lot like the one that attacked her brother and me.

And all of a sudden, my heart is pounding and I can't force myself to stay where I am. I'm already powering through to where I spotted her just now.

It wasn't her, I hear my fox growl at me.

"You can't even smell her here," I tell him, my teeth gritting as I keep pushing forward. "So how would you know?"

I have other ways of sensing her, he snaps back, *and she's not here.*

But that only makes the dread stronger. If she's not here and I haven't seen her while I was up a second ago…

Where the fuck *is* she?

My jaw clenching, I keep propelling myself through water, but I should already have reached the spot where I saw her get attacked.

Frowning, I stop and I start looking around, the dread seeping straight into my bones now. Then I see one of the creatures.

And instead of moving away, I keep moving *towards*, slowly but with determination, as I scan its body for some fucking clue, fearing it might be a limb or something.

Of course, that only makes the creature spot me. And I'm too close for its comfort, so it starts charging at me like the water beast that it is.

And it grabs me by the neck, the claws sinking in, and it starts shaking me like I'm a rag doll, making me kick my legs and struggle for air as I try to pry its claws away from my throat.

But the grip only tightens. And for a second, I think I'm going to die.

Then I make all my muscles tense up, I swing my right arm back and I slam a fist into the creature's ribs.

It snatches the hand away, making me have to fight not to gasp for air.

And as it's still bent from the blow, I move to attack, the mermaid's eyes darting up to mine.

I stop, the gaze making me snap out of my rage.

And I lower my hand and I shake my head, waving my hands for no. And I just keep floating there, closing my eyes against my better judgment.

The creature doesn't move, but it only takes a couple of seconds for me to start really struggling not to start breathing.

And another couple of seconds for me to take a sharp breath and swallow a mouthful of water, starting to choke, my entire body in pain.

Then, there's a moment of lightheadedness that seems dangerously… easy.

And the next thing I know, I'm being pushed out of the water and onto the shore.

When I come to, coughing and spewing water, I look up and onto the island above me. I hear the gong marking my finishing the Game and all my body wants to do is crash, but my eyes are already fixing on the shore, trying to see whether she's there despite knowing it's too far away.

Then the Box zaps me out, making me land in the bleachers. For a second, as usual, it feels as if I'm going to lose my balance, but I quickly regain my footing.

And I look around, finding myself among the other winners, some of them standing, some of them sprawled on the benches, recovering.

And there she is, alive and well, chatting with some girl I don't know.

For a second, our eyes meet and she seems hesitant, but she throws me a smile and then turns her attention back onto her friend.

Makes me feel like a fucking idiot, causing all that drama down there. Especially when I see how carefree she was while *I* was still in the Game.

But then I sense Ricky walk up to me and I turn to look at him, clapping him on the back. "Congratulations, mate," I tell him with a smile.

And he throws me such a wide grin and we turn to keep watching the Game in silence, but my dissatisfaction doesn't dissipate. And I can sense my fox feeling the same.

I take a deep breath and decide to confront him. "Come on, let's hear it," I tell him, "that 'told you so' that's on the tip of your tongue."

For a second, he stays silent. *Told you so?* he echoes with a fake little frown. And his voice is all feigned surprise and earnestness when he keeps going. *No, I mean… I just assessed the situation, predicted how it would end, informed you about my findings, all of them and in time, and am now enjoying seeing it unravel just the way I thought it would.*

It makes me have to fight not to roll my eyes. “In other words, told you so.”

How clever you can be, he snaps. *Pity you never are when it actually matters.*

He pauses for a second before he turns serious, for real, and asks, *So,* now *will you stop seeing the girl?*

I almost let out a scoff. “Stop seeing her?” I ask with a frown. “Like altogether? Why would I do *that*?”

I can sense he’s not happy with the direction I’m taking. And I understand I failed to deliver on my promise from last night.

So it’s in an apologetic voice that I say, “Look, I admit it, okay? She’s become a bit of a distraction. But it’s nothing that can’t be easily fixed.”

Yeah?

“Yeah,” I reply with determination in my voice. “I guess it would’ve been better,” I concede, carefully, “if I’d listened to her from the start and made sure I followed all her little rules. So from now on, I’ll be doing exactly that, keeping the conversation to a minimum and refraining from seeing her outside our little sessions.”

Sure, he drawls. *And that way, you’ll be more focused than ever, right?*

I ignore the snarky way he says it. “Exactly,” I reply, with even greater determination than a minute ago.

Fine, let’s do it your way, he says, *that’s always worked out well for us.*

But the very next moment, I hear the sand run out and the rest of the players get zapped out, marking the end of the Game and making the crowd go wild.

To my surprise, we finish at nine to eight in Grimms' favor.

Which puts us in a much better position for the Fourth Game, which I know will be held on May 1st.

And that’s many weeks from now, weeks and weeks of enjoying my time here, especially now that there’s no shit going down, we’re doing good, and I’m getting my focus back.

Chapter 23 - Nyx

The late April sun is making the treetops above me glisten like they were taken from some other, more romantic time. I'm lying on my back with my knees bent, listening to Hilde flipping pages of her latest thriller obsession, while my brother and Ricky are playing with an authentic sixteenth-century crossbow that General Alaric gave Nikolay for his name day. And I'm finding it hard to keep myself from daydreaming.

The grass I'm brushing with my fingers is so delicate…

The noises in the gardens so relaxing…

The breeze caressing my bare legs so warm…

And there are other groups of students wasting time in the gardens on this lovely day, but it's only when I spot a group of Fiains coming to join a group of ours that my focus gets drawn away from the splendor of nature around me.

I don't lift my head off the ground, but I do hold my breath as I observe them.

Then I see them give each other pats on their shoulders, I hear laughter booming and I feel my muscles relax.

The Fourth Game is scheduled for May 21st, which is the day after tomorrow. But the past two weeks, there's been more tension between the Academies. And it's just little fights breaking out here and there, but it's still making me anxious.

And it's also making me wonder… Could it have anything to do with Dahrian not being here? It seems like too big of a coincidence, that it all started going downhill practically the moment he disappeared.

It almost makes me think *he's* the one keeping this whole thing from falling apart.

"Who would've thought this would be so much fun?" I hear Ricky say right after I hear another arrow hit the target they're practicing on.

It makes me snap out of it. No, I tell myself, I won't be doing this again, I won't be thinking about him. So I remind myself of the decision I made when he left, the decision to welcome the interruption in our little arrangement and get my life back on track.

Which means trying to solve the puzzle that is Vasilisa, I think with a sigh. I pull a blade of grass from the ground and I twirl it in my fingers.

Ever since my birthday, I've been going to her at least once a week, trying to get information out of her. But ever since she *ordered* me to keep an eye on the Archon and basically told me I'm stupid and spineless… She's been awfully quiet.

There seems to be no question she's willing to answer, which makes me want to know the answers even more badly.

It snaps me out of it, when Ricky says to Nikolay, "Hold on a second," and the very next second, I hear faint arguing coming from the direction of the Grimms and the Fiains forming one large group.

I prop myself on my elbows and I turn to see what's going on. And they're only arguing, still splayed out on the couple of stone benches near the Dame Gothel courtyard.

My eyes snap to Ricky, who's just putting his phone back in his pocket, looking a little less care-free than he did a minute ago. But then he throws a smile at my brother and the two of them resume their little crossbow session.

Still, I find myself unable to return to my ruminations, so I turn my eyes back onto the discussion near Dame Gothel.

For a while, I just keep looking at them, fighting the urge to use my vampiric hearing to eavesdrop.

And just as I'm about to lie back down, one of the Grimms springs from his bench and then one of the Fiains does the same.

All of a sudden, they're getting in each other's faces, the shouting growing louder and making Hilde look up from her book. "What's going

on?" she asks, tension in her voice.

I don't reply, I just keep watching. Fuck. Should I do something?

But it's at that same time that Hilde nudges me and says, "Look, Nyx, there's Dahrian. He's back."

My heart skips a beat and my eyes dart to His Hotness walking straight to the circle, the O'Malley brothers tailing him. "So it would seem," I say.

And I watch him, intently, as he walks into the circle and starts greeting people with this grin on his face.

It makes me frown, observing the whole thing, but within half a minute, everyone's back to relaxed chatting, and it almost looks as if nothing bad had been brewing.

I snap out of it as soon as I see Dahrian saying bye to everyone and start walking back to camp. I quickly lie back on the ground, so as not to be seen watching, going back to brushing the grass with my fingers with my knees pulled up.

And I'm already relaxing, thinking this will be it, when I hear Hilde call out, "Hi, Dahrian."

Frowning, I look up and I see her waving. Furiously.

I can't help but turn my head to the side, resting my left cheek on the ground as I watch Dahrian slow down a little, his hands in his pockets. And his eyes land on Hilde first, but then they find mine and they linger. I don't look away, but I don't nod either, I just keep brushing the grass with my fingers.

He breaks eye contact. "Hey there, Hilde," his voice booms, making my heart tighten in my chest. Then he gives us all a wave, his gaze darting to mine. "And the rest of you rude people."

"Ah, Howe, didn't see you there, buddy," I hear my brother say as Ricky and him stop playing with the crossbow, but I don't take my eyes away from His Hotness.

Dahrian glances at him and he gives a little smile, but then he looks back at me and he keeps walking, but for a second, his eyes drag up and down my legs, making my breath hitch.

The next thing I know, he's disappearing in the direction of the camp, and I feel Hilde's eyes on me.

I don't get up, but I turn to look at her. She's staring at me with her fists pressed to her mouth, looking as if she's suppressing a giggle. "What?" I ask with a little frown.

She lowers her hands to the ground. “He knows my name?” she breathes out, a huge grin forming on her face.

For a second, I just blink at her. Then I sit up. “Oh for crying out loud,” I say with a roll of my eyes, “did you honestly think he didn’t?”

I hear a ping sound from my phone, but I just keep looking at my cousin.

She frowns a little, but then she lets out this awkward little laugh and says, “Men don’t really pay any attention to me.”

Now that annoys me. “What about that O’Malley guy? You mean to say I *didn’t* see him chatting you up at the party before the Third Game?”

“You noticed?” she asks, a frown creasing her forehead again. Then she shakes her head. “No, he was only being polite. You’re reading into it.”

“Fine, maybe,” I reply. “But maybe you’re not reading into it *enough*. Right now, I could start listing guys I’ve seen ogling you and never stop. But you never seem to notice.”

She lets out a little laugh. “Watch it, Nyx, I might start thinking you care.”

“It’s annoying, Hilde,” I insist, “the way you demean yourself for no reason whatsoever. There are plenty of men out there who’d kill to get under those pants.”

Now that seems to render her speechless. She doesn’t say anything, she just frowns at me.

Not waiting for her to say anything, I let out a scoff and I whip my phone out to see what that ping was about.

“I want those legs on my shoulders,” the text says.

Sender? Howe.

I press my lips tight, my heart starting to race. “Good to see you, too,” I type, sensing Hilde going back to her book.

“You know what would make it even better?”

I roll my eyes, but I also smile. “I’ll take a wild guess,” I reply. “My legs on your shoulders?”

“Bingo. Such a clever girl you are. I want you in F12 in ten.”

And my eyes keep darting to that ‘want you’, my skin flushing.

But I hesitate. And not because it’s something we don’t do. Ever since my birthday, that is, which is basically the day the rule about spontaneous meetups went out the window. Since then, we’ve mostly managed to stick to abandoned classrooms, but we’ve been meeting up to fuck at barely more than a moment’s notice. On the lake shore at one of his parties. In a broom

closet after a mandatory fire drill. In a bathroom while the others were eating lunch, thinking we'd gone to get them all more sodas from the kitchens.

And the sex is… Every time we meet, it gets a little more impossible for me to stop him from trying to get a second round. Sometimes, it plain doesn't work at all. I get so lost in it all that I find his head between my legs long after he'd finished. And then I get self-conscious again and it's over, but until that moment…

Still, now that it's been two whole weeks since we last did it… There's this reluctance in me to start it back up again.

"So?" he asks.

"I'm busy now," I finally reply.

"Time and place then, please and thank you."

Frowning, I drop my phone to the ground and lower myself back into a lying position. I haven't let myself repeat the mistake from my birthday, obsessing about whether he has anyone else at the moment. I've told myself it's not something I should even be thinking about and, well, I haven't been.

But I've never really stopped noticing it, how little he reveals of himself.

And how infuriatingly confusing he can be. I mean, he makes it seem as if he wants to know *every little thing* about me, mind-numbingly boring stuff I never tell anyone because, well, who'd give a shit?

And I fucking tell him, even the things I wouldn't tell anyone else. I mean, there's so much private shit he knows about me, my family, my hopes and dreams...

But whenever *I* ask *him* something, it's all vague answers or deflective jokes or attempts at getting me riled up.

So, of course, his answer to where he was going was… "Wouldn't *you* like to know?" followed by a bite to my neck.

It makes me blow out a frustrated breath, just thinking about it.

But I got my answer from Ricky, at least half of it, when once, in passing, he said to some Grimm that 'Boss' had to go home for a bit.

Ricky, I think as I keep brushing the grass with my fingers. Ricky could give me all the answers, right?

No, I warn myself. Won't be thinking about it. I pull another blade of grass from the ground and I lift it up to my legs.

I stroke the skin with its tip, imagining actually putting my legs on his shoulders. And it makes a pang of desire shoot through me, making me bite

my lip.

I take my phone off the ground, I sit up and I type, “F12 at midnight.”

I exhale, put the phone down and fix my eyes on my brother and Ricky still taking turns on the crossbow. Nikolay shoots and hits the bull’s eye.

Ricky comes to take the weapon and claps him on the back. “If you wanted to,” he asks as he turns to him, “could you use Mind Magic to make someone take a shot that’s just as precise as that?”

“Yeah,” my brother starts, beaming, “once I’m inside someone’s head.”

Then he turns serious, running his hand through his hair as Ricky waits for an answer. “It’s just…”

Letting out a nervous laugh, he hesitates for a second. Ricky nudges him to go on.

“I can’t always do it, you know. It takes a certain mindset, worming your way into someone else’s consciousness. Sometimes, I can’t just snap my fingers and get there.”

Wow, he’s not just bragging. He’s telling his new friend the truth as well. Must be a budding love, I think to myself with a smile.

“Well,” Ricky says as he adjusts the crossbow for shooting, “I actually think I could help you with that. I know I’m a shifter, but I’m interested in all Magic and I know quite a bit about the kind of problems you’re experiencing.”

And he takes his shot, the arrow landing far from the target.

“Really?” my brother beams at him.

Until his phone starts ringing and he rummages through his pocket, saying, “Sorry, Ricky, my man, gotta take this.”

“Sure,” Ricky says, lays the crossbow on the ground and walks up to the two of us. “Why don’t we go have lunch?”

“I’m ravenous,” I hear Hilde say as she starts getting up.

Ricky turns to me, wiggling his eyebrows.

“I think I’ll stay here for a bit longer,” I say with a smile.

“Suit yourself,” he hums and the two of them wave and start making their way back to the castle.

It’s almost at the very same moment that I hear Nikolay finish his conversation and see him rush over to me.

*

He’s throwing me such a wide grin, it makes *me* smile as well. I look up at him, raising my hand to shield my eyes from the sun, actually feeling a

little thrill as I ask, “What is it?”

He comes into a crouch next to me. “Remember that idea you gave me, sis,” he asks in a low, excited voice, “about becoming an investor?”

That makes me let out a little laugh. “Wasn’t mine, but sure.”

“Well,” he drawls teasingly, “turns out it was a really stupid suggestion.” I roll my eyes at him. “Do you know how incredibly boring that work is? And it goes on and on and on.”

“Okay, Nikolay,” I snap at him a little, but there’s still a smile on my face. “Will you just spit it out, please.”

He pauses for a second, looking deeper into my eyes as he wiggles his eyebrows at me. “The land sale. I’ve managed to save it, sis.”

For a second, I just look at him. “What?” I ask as I sit up straight.

“Yeah,” he continues with a smile, oblivious to the sobering tone of my voice. “So there you have it. I’ll be fixing things for the family after all.”

I have to take a deep breath to calm myself. “Were there actual papers signed, Nikolay?” I ask in my most serious voice. “Did you have a lawyer present?”

He frowns. “No, it’s not at that stage yet.” He pauses for a second before he adds, in a much less cheerful voice, “And Max told me he’d recommend someone.”

“Max?” I snap.

“Yeah, well,” he says, starting to avoid my eyes. He doesn’t sound so happy with himself when he explains, “I got a little help from him. No big deal.”

“What kind of help?” I ask, this sense of unease spreading through my entire body.

“He found new buyers for me,” he snaps as he frowns at me. “Bloody hell. What does it even matter? As long as we’re selling.”

And he looks away, his face flushing and his teeth gritting.

But it’s making me so mad, that they’d sooner ask my ex fucking fiance for help than believe *me* when I say I’ll fix it.

And since we’re no longer engaged, I know Max isn’t doing this out of the goodness of his heart. After all, when it came to business, he was taught to think like a businessman.

“What did he ask for in return?” I demand as I grab my brother’s forearm and make him look at me again. “What did you promise him?”

He breaks his arm free and just looks at me for a second. “What did I promise him?” There’s bitterness in his voice when he asks, “Why do you keep doing this?”

I blink at him. “Doing what?”

He doesn’t say anything. He just grits his teeth some more.

“Look, Nick,” I tell him, deciding to be upfront. “It’s just dumb.” I angrily wave my hand in no direction in particular. “I *told* you I got Mother off my back.”

I don’t tell him about my own investigations into different types of investments. I just say, “She promised she’d give me until the end of the school year to make up my mind about the engagement and I was going to __”

“I don’t care what you were going to,” he hisses at me, putting one hand on the ground so he can get in my face. “And I don’t care who you’ll marry, Max or a bunch of bloody cats. And I don’t care how good you are in whatever you do.” Only growing more upset, he throws a warning finger at me. “You’ll stop acting as if I’m not the man of the house and you’ll shut up about the bloody land and you’ll let me take care of it.”

With that, he pushes himself off the ground and moves to walk away.

“Nikolay,” I call after him, pissed-off, but trying to keep my voice down.

“And the day after tomorrow,” he orders, as he throws a look over his shoulder, “you’ll take it down a notch.”

He’s talking about the Fourth Game. And the look he’s giving me… The look is so painfully familiar.

Fuming, I kick myself off the ground and rush after him. “Oh, so it’s not me using Blood Magic that’s the problem?” I demand as I follow him, my eyes fixed on the back of his head. “Just me winning, huh?”

But he doesn’t reply. He doesn’t even look at me. I stop and he just keeps walking, leaving me standing there, wanting to pull all my fucking hair out.

*

By the time I’m in the portrait room, I’m not mad, I’m seething. And I know by now that Vasilisa was only able to use Mind Magic on me that time because she’d practically just had a lick of my blood, but she’s still here, aware of everything that’s going on in front of her. And I really need to stop this thing with my brother from really getting to me and just move on, but somehow, I can’t.

I can’t get his look out of my head.

So I sit on the cold stone floor and just sit there, frowning and wondering about this tightness in my chest, one that feels impossible and at the same time so familiar.

It makes me think of Father's death for some reason, something I haven't let myself think about for a really long time. And with that always come images of bloody bandages, syringes and people whispering as they gather around him, the great patriarch of the family.

But the great patriarch of the family had the same thing his brother Aleksei had. It's the main reason I learned so early to brew the perfect blood purification potion. Because some vampire blood infections work similarly to human hemophilia, making every single cut into a danger of bleeding out. And the only thing that works against it is a perfect blood purification potion.

To an extent, of course, as I learned over the years, watching Father slowly get weaker and weaker.

But just thinking about it makes me feel so sick and so eager to stop going in that direction. And why am I even thinking about *that* all of a sudden? After all, it's one of those memories that have successfully flung me into a depression spiral many times so far and I never know when they might do it again.

Still, there's the look flickering before my eyes, forcing me back into wondering why I'm so troubled by it.

With bitterness in my mouth, I decide to snap out of it and proceed to do what I came here to do in the first place.

"Vasilisa," I call out as I fold my legs under myself, sit up straighter and fix my eyes on the portrait.

And as always, Lady X disappears and Vasilisa appears, right in front of me, with the habitual smirk on her face.

"Yes, little great-great-granddaughter?" she drawls sweetly as she comes to lean next to the painting, her arms folded and one knee bent, the boot on the wall. "Come on, let's see what you've got for me today."

And here we go again, I think with a sigh. First *my* questions, which she won't answer, then *her* questions, which I won't answer. And round and round we go in this delightful little dance.

But what am I supposed to do? *Not* come ask my great-great-grandmother the former Queen questions about her, what happened in the mysterious war

she seems to have participated in, and how she ended up disappearing from history books and residing in a portrait?

"What was your maiden name?" I ask, running out of good questions to ask her.

"None of your business," come the same four words as always, coupled with the smirk.

It's not that she doesn't want me to ask, I think for the millionth time. It's obvious she likes the attention. She just doesn't want to give the answers.

"Who was your Master of Ceremony?" I ask.

"None of your business."

"Why won't you talk to me about any of it?" I demand, but flatly. I'm still dying to know, it's just that the novelty has worn off. "Why won't you give me any answers?"

"None of your business."

And she steps away from the wall, coming into a low crouch in front of me. "My turn," she says, flashing her fangs. Deliberately.

But I'm no longer scared of her. "Fine," I say.

"Any news?"

She's referring to the Archon, of course. It's the only question I always do give the answer to, just because it's not leverage that's in question, it's a potential danger I need to keep an eye on.

"No," I say, "and honestly, I've done all the background checks that I could. The woman's as clean as a whistle. And there seems to be nothing suspicious going on."

"Good," she says and, to my surprise, she sits on the floor opposite me, mirroring my position. "So?"

Now, the question here is, "How did my dynasty come to this? Was it the Unveiling that was to blame?"

And usually, I refuse to tell her anything. But right now, looking into those cold, strange eyes as she just keeps sitting on the floor with me, I feel this need to give her *something*.

"I have a feeling you won't like the answer."

"Spit it out."

"Well, no," I start, seeing a flash of surprise in her eyes. I take a second to look for the right words. "It's not true. We didn't lose control of the land because of the Unveiling. After the initial hiccups, for a while, things actually went pretty smoothly."

She quirks an eyebrow.

"When they learned what we really are," I explain, "the Scions feared us more than ever, but the family actually did make sure the vampires across the land respected the Treaty, so they eventually accepted us as superior to them and they just let us do our thing."

"Until?" she demands.

"Until great-grandfather Nikolay, I guess."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing," I say with a sigh. "That's the problem. He was weak and he let his government keep taking advantage of the people until the people rebelled."

At that, she looks away, pensively. "Children," she says, this bitterness in her voice.

For a second, I just look at her. But then it pops into my head, the way she spoke about my generation. And it occurs to me, a way to get her to talk, and it makes my blood rush around a little.

"Yeah, children," I echo, trying to match her tone.

And I hesitate a little, but then I force myself to ask, "But I mean, it was easier in your day, right?" I make a point of drawling the following words, "So much less complicated."

It works like a fucking charm. I watch her push herself off the floor, come to tower over me and shoot me such a nasty look. "What're you even talking about, girl?"

I get up as well, glad she's reacting in whatever way, but still a little anxious.

"You wouldn't know complicated if it bit you on the fucking neck. You know who my ancestor was?" she demands.

I shake my head for no.

"Vasilisa the Wise herself," she drawls, getting more worked up by the second. "And I don't mean the Vasilisa *you* know about."

"What do you mean?" I ask, my eyebrows pulling down.

She lets out an angry yet amused laugh. "Little girl with a doll running to Baba Yaga so her evil stepmother and stepsisters wouldn't freeze to death? Returning with fire in random skulls?"

She scoffs. "Come on."

It only makes my frown grow deeper, but she's not waiting for a reaction.

She's getting in my face, continuing through gritted teeth and with fire in her eyes, "How about a *queen,* with impeccable instinct, who went to war with hostile neighboring lands, unleashed tremendous power within herself and returned with her enemies' heads in her bags?"

What the…

"*That's* who I'm descended from," she concludes with a sharp nod. Then she lets out a bitter little scoff. "And still, all they wanted me to do was lounge around drawing rooms, doing *nothing* all day long."

She throws me a disgusted little look. "While *you*, you get to go to the fucking Academy, the one *I* practically built for you, and you dare bitch about it all being complicated?"

But my mind doesn't linger on her words, it lingers on the look she threw me. And how similar it felt to the one I came here all mad about.

"I guess we're done for today," I finally say. And without another word, I turn on my heel and grab the doorknob.

"I guess we are," I hear her spit out as I open the door and walk out, slamming it behind me.

And as I walk over to one of the rookery windows, I guess there's a part of me wondering why my reaction to this isn't stronger.

But then there's a part of me that knows very well why it isn't.

Because there's another memory that's surfacing, one that has never surfaced before, simply because I never let it.

In it, I'm fifteen and I'm in the Cathedral, standing by Father's coffin with the rest of the family, sobbing inconsolably. And there's this moment where they come, some people I never fully register, and they want to take him away. And I move to throw myself onto the coffin to stop them, when I feel a sharp tug at my waist and I find an arm wrapping itself around me, pulling me back into line with the others.

And I feel her come to stand next to me. My mother.

It surprises me, but it also makes me feel warm around the heart. And I turn to look at her, my face all sticky with tears, but the expression that I find on hers makes the warmth turn into ice.

"Anastasya," she whispers through gritted teeth, "for crying out loud. Won't you take it down a notch?"

And the look in her eyes, it's the same look, or the same sort of look my brother gave me today, the look telling me I'm a burden, the look telling me I'm simply too much, whatever I do and however I do it.

But now, it's no longer making me angry. It's simply making me feel… all alone.

*

It's already dark out but it's not until midnight that I have the rendezvous. So I decide to stop moping around my room and leave for the Common Room with a book in my hand.

Lost in thoughts, I start walking down the stairs, but I only reach one of the first landings when I hear a familiar voice call, "Nyx."

My head snaps to my right and I see Ricky walking out of my brother's room, seemingly a little tipsy.

"Hi, Ricky," I say, I make myself throw him the warmest smile I can and I turn to walk away, not really in the mood for socializing.

But before I can do it, he catches my eye once again and asks, "You okay?"

"Yeah," I reply, but I don't start walking again. I come to a full stop and I frown instead. "He told you about our fight, didn't he?"

Ricky runs his hand through his hair. "Nothing too specific," he replies with a nervous laugh, "if there's some secret you're worried about."

"Wow," I snap, "he should wear that as a badge of honor."

And I turn on my heel, but almost as soon as I do, Ricky comes to block my way.

"Look, Nyx," he tells me with fire in his eyes, "he's a good guy and you're a good girl. You go to this amazing Academy, you come from such a powerful family, and you have your whole lives ahead of you." He pauses a little, his passion making my eyebrows shoot up. "I know *for a fact* that your brother and yourself will get exactly what you want in the end and only grow closer along the way."

I take the smallest step back, my eyebrows pulling down.

Ricky seems to catch that. "Oh," he says awkwardly, "I see that I'm overstepping. I apologize for that." He laughs nervously. "I'm not used to alcohol, you see. In fact, until a year ago, I'd never had a single drop."

"You're kidding me," I blurt out, a smile now tugging at my lips.

"No no, I really *was* that lame."

This time, we both laugh. I move to keep walking, but make it clear I'm open to him walking with me. He does.

"And you weren't overstepping," I say as we start going down the stairs together, "just so you know. That was just me being… me, I guess. I'm

actually grateful to you for asking if I'm okay."

"Well," he starts, a little hesitantly, "if you ever want to thank me…"

I turn to raise my eyebrows at him.

He gives me a little smile and says, "Shoot me a text when you have some free time. I've a question I've been meaning to ask you."

I let out a laugh. "Well, you've got my attention *now*."

And it's at that exact moment that we land in the nearly empty Common Room and I motion at one of the nearby tables.

He throws me a grin and we go to take a seat. I lift a finger to ask for patience, and I pour us each a drink from the bottle on the shelf below the table.

And all the while, my mind is buzzing with the questions *I* could be asking *him*. But I make myself stop thinking about it. It just wouldn't be right.

"Go," I say as soon as we clink glasses and take a sip.

"Okay," he starts, already getting excited, "so, I already asked your brother this exact same question, but I'd like to hear from you as well."

"Come on, out with it."

"Yes," he says with a nod and a laugh. "So…" And he leans forward a little. "Do you feel any… *special* connection with the Romanov whose name you've been given? Or any connection at all?"

Now, that makes me frown. "Um, Anastasya Nikolayevna?" I let out a laugh. "I'd have more luck establishing a connection with Rasputin himself."

He frowns.

"Lame attempt at a joke at my own expense," I say with a wave of my hand. "Doesn't matter. In all seriousness, no," I reply. "I mean, there are pictures of her all over our estates, but all I ever heard about her was…" I shrug my shoulders. "She was just a girl."

"Hm," he says pensively. "Pity."

"Why?"

He just looks at me for a second. "You know how there's *power* in a name?" he finally asks, dropping his voice at the same time he ups the enthusiasm. "Some ancient magic perhaps."

Interesting, I think to myself, my mind rushing straight to Vasilisa. "Yeah."

“Well,” he starts, making me lean a little forward in anticipation. “I’ve just been doing some research and toying with the idea of there being more to that. Like…” He pauses, looking away as he thinks. “What if there was power in *sharing* a name with someone as well?”

“Interesting,” I say in a voice that’s barely above a whisper. “Like, being able to communicate? Or transfer power?”

“Exactly,” he replies with a smile and that spark in his eye. Then he frowns. “And there’d have to be a blood bond, probably, but yeah, things like that.”

I lean back in my chair. “Well,” I tell him, “if you ever figure it out…”

He raises his drink to me, throws it back and sets the glass down, starting to get up.

And it all comes so abruptly, the whole situation and the way I’m feeling making me fail to resist my base urges.

“You know, Ricky,” I say, making him look at me and lower himself back into the chair, smiling.

“I really admire the way you find time for all your interests,” I continue, albeit a little hesitantly, “especially being an alpha’s right hand.”

“Well,” he says with a grin.

“How come you didn’t go with him?” I dare to ask.

To my misfortune, the question earns me a frown. “He didn’t need me, I guess,” he says, but not a little suspiciously.

Fuck. But then it occurs to me and I don’t waste a moment second-guessing it. “You know what I just remembered?” I say, making his eyebrows shoot up.

I don’t give him a chance to protest. I just get up, walk over to the bar and grab a bottle of Feinmann’s whiskey. “Look what we have here,” I tell him as I come to hold it out for him.

For a second, he just stares at the label. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” he almost yells out as he takes the bottle.

I get back into my chair, smiling.

Ricky keeps turning the thing in his hands. “I can’t find this *anywhere* and I’ve always wanted to taste it,” he says as he looks up at me.

“I know,” I reply softly. “I had it ordered for you. But how are you so hung up on it if you’ve never even tried it?”

“I remember it from when I was a kid,” he says, still smiling but a little pensively. “My parents used to bring it out after dinner and get all tipsy, but

I wasn't allowed to have any and I remember that making me want to try even more."

Parents? I thought he didn't have any family.

He apparently catches the confusion in my eyes because the next thing he says is, "I was five when they were all killed."

"Shit," I blurt out. "I'm so sorry."

"No, don't worry about it," he says with a sad little smile and a wave of his hand. And he opens the bottle and takes a sip straight from it, wincing as he swallows. "I had those five years with them, and afterwards, well, I had my books—"

It's a fit of coughing that interrupts him. "In the name of Lycan," he squeezes out, "this is strong."

And when he locks eyes with me again, he already seems quite a bit tipsier than a second ago.

I don't waste time. "And Howe," I say, finishing his sentence. "I mean, you weren't alone, you had *him*, and he seems like a good friend."

"Howe?" he echoes with a frown.

And for a second, I think it didn't work, my little plan to loosen his tongue.

But then he lets out a little laugh. "No," he starts, his speech a little slurred now, "me and Howe only started hanging out, like…" He waves his hand, looking away and into the distance, as if trying to remember. "Two years ago. No, less. At the start of our third year."

Now that makes me quirk an eyebrow. "Really?" I ask.

"Yeah, I mean," Ricky keeps going, his forearms sliding down the table a little, "I've always known him, but while we were growing up, my caretaker…" He waves his hand again. "Doesn't matter. The point is, we weren't really allowed to spend any time together."

Frowning, I lean a little forward. "Was it your family's… declining status?"

He raises his eyebrows at me, his body swaying a little, almost imperceptibly. "You mean, *his* family's."

I shake my head a little, my lips curling into a hesitant smile. "But he's the alpha and the son of a powerful matriarch, isn't he?"

"Yeah," Ricky replies as a frown starts creasing his forehead, "but he never had a father and his mother was a little unorthodox."

He lets out a little burp. I don't say anything. I'm practically holding my breath, just waiting for him to keep talking.

He does. "Sorry about that," he says with an awkward little laugh. "Anyway, then his mother died and that made things…" He frowns again. "Well, it made things *bad*. And somehow…"

He shakes his head, the incredulous look in his eyes making me want to yell at him to keep going. "I guess people were angry and scared," he finally says, this sadness in his voice as he turns his unfocused eyes onto the surface of the table, "and they just turned their backs on her family, blaming her for everything that happened. So for a good while, they were on their own, Dahrian and his brothers."

For one long moment, I find myself at a loss for words. My voice is barely above a whisper when I finally say, "Wow, that's brutal."

Ricky looks up. "Yeah," he says with a shake of his head, "it's a brutal world we live in."

And I know I should stop, but one more. Just one more question.

"So that's what brought the two of you together?" I ask. "Being without parents and stuff. I mean, you seem so much closer than I'd expect from a two-year-long friendship."

He lets out a little laugh. "I guess we do," he slurs, "and sure, the family stuff plays a part as well…" Then he shakes his head, thinking. "But no, none of it would've happened if it weren't for Dahrian's ex."

It feels like a slap across the face. "His ex?" I echo.

"Yeah," he says with a nod, still out of it but turning more serious by the second, "the first time we got to talking, they'd just broken up and, well, Dahrian was *not* in a good place, to say the least."

For a second, I just look at him, struggling to keep myself from showing emotions. "Why?" I finally ask, my voice coming out a little choked-up despite all the effort. "Was it some great love?"

Ricky lets out a loud sigh. "He doesn't like talking about it. All I know is, Aisling cheated on him with his best friend and he wasn't the same person after that."

What the…

"And I do understand things don't always make sense…" He pauses to lock eyes with me, fighting to keep his open. "But it somehow still keeps me puzzled, that something like that would happen to a guy like him. You know?"

“Yeah,” I say, without even having registered the question. “Definitely.”

What snaps me out of it is Ricky lifting the bottle to take another sip and missing his mouth.

“Um, Ricky,” I say as I take it away from him. “I think that maybe you’ve had enough of that.”

My words snap him out of it enough to throw me a smile and say, “Well, Nyx, I think you’re right.”

He gets up and he gives me a smile and a wave before he turns on his heel.

And I do feel vaguely guilty and ashamed of myself, watching him stumble out of the Common Room, but my mind almost immediately goes back to Dahrian.

I go to throw myself back into the chair, my eyebrows pulled down and this restlessness driving me crazy.

Dahrian and Aisling, I start repeating to myself, the name Aisling so grating to me, it makes me grit my fucking teeth.

Serves me right, I curse at myself. I wanted to make him less of a mystery and ended up knowing a lot more than I *really* wanted to know.

And now I’ll have fucking Aisling running marathons in my head for days.

Then the clock strikes fifteen to midnight, I realize I’ll soon have to start making my way to F12, and my restlessness…

It births an idea that makes me wonder if I’m going crazy.

But the urge is too strong. It overwhelms me and I immediately whip out my phone and pull up the chat with Dahrian.

“F12 at midnight,” my last message reads.

I find myself having to beat around the bush. “You there already?” I type.

There’s a moment of staring at the screen before the three dots appear. “On my way.”

I wince, but I do it. “Mind meeting me someplace else?”

“Wherever you want.”

“My room?” I type and I force myself to press Send. “Room 53, 5th floor.”

It makes me frown, when the reply doesn’t come straight away. And it makes me fear I’ve overstepped.

But after one excruciatingly long moment, *this* message appears, “Yeah. Be there in ten.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and I look at the clock again, wondering what the fuck I'm doing and trying to make myself see that this, among other things, would also mean breaking the rules.

But instead of coming to my senses and aborting the mission altogether, I find myself getting out of my chair and marching up to my room, all at once feverish and focused.

*

By the time I hear the soft little knock, I've already smelled him. And it was fine while he was still gone, when I didn't even know when he'd be coming back, but now that we're about to be alone again, the seconds between now and my legs on his shoulders seem like a fucking eternity.

I get off the bed, my eyes darting to my bare feet. I drag them up my boxers and my T-shirt, all of a sudden finding myself scrambling to decide whether I should change into something else after all.

Taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I decide to stop with the nonsense, I pad to the door and I slowly open it. And there he is, waiting to be let in with his lips curled into a smile and his hands in his pockets, but I first throw a glance over his shoulder, to make sure the Common Room really is empty.

It is.

But when I let my eyes land back on *him*, I find him peering over my head and into my room with one eyebrow raised and tremendous focus on his face.

I frown. Then I grab him by the collar of his shirt and I pull him inside, making him snap out of it and let out a stifled little laugh.

"Never been in a Duchess's room before," he says, in a low, playful voice, as I close the door behind him.

But when I turn back to him, he's once again not even looking at me. His hands in his pockets, he's scanning the room, slowly strolling past the commode with the pictures and the knick-knacks.

It makes heat wash over me when I drag my eyes up and down his body, watching the muscles in his arm flex as he reaches to take one of the knick-knacks in his hand.

But at the same time, it makes me so pissed, to be this fucking eager while he's there taking his sweet time with the fucking medal I got in third grade.

I walk over to him, slapping his hand away and making him finally turn to look at me, his eyebrows raised in amusement.

"Didn't invite you to snoop around," I protest.

He quirks an eyebrow at me. Then, sliding his hands back into his pockets, he takes a step closer, his head tilting and his lips curling into a sexy, self-satisfied little smile. "Impatient, are we?"

My eyes narrow. "Fuck off," I say and I fold my arms.

He straight-out ignores that, instead prying my hands away from my chest as he shamelessly drags his eyes down my body. "You go to bed in that?" he asks in a soft, husky voice, my wrists still in his grip.

I lock eyes with him. "Sorry I don't lounge around in lacy negligees," I say, a little snappily but contently, now that the attention is finally on *me*.

"You hear me complaining?" he leans to whisper in my ear, making my skin prick with pleasure and my hands fight to be released so they can start touching.

But he only lets them go to hook his fingers into my boxers and yank them down, making me suck in a sharp breath as he wastes no time in grabbing my ass with both hands, lifting me up and putting my legs around him.

My arms wrapped around his shoulders and my entire body flooding with desire, I let him throw me on the bed, but when he moves to slide his hand between my thighs, I click my tongue.

And I make him take his shirt off and I push him into rolling over, so that I'm in his lap and he's propped up on his elbows, the cut of his muscles even more insanely hot when they're flexing like they are right now.

Locking eyes with him, I back up a little, delighting in how intense and glazed the look in his eyes becomes when my hands reach his belt and get to work on unbuckling it.

He's not the only one who's been learning, I think as I unzip his pants and tug them down a little, biting my lip just thinking about those sounds I got him to make the last time I did this.

I take his rock-hard dick in my hand, making him let out a delicious little grunt. And I start lowering my head to take him in my mouth, but before I do, I look up to see him hungrily soaking up my every move, his breathing heavy and his eyes glazed.

And I put my mouth around him and I hear him suck in a sharp breath, his hand flying to grab a fistful of my hair, and I think to myself, if there

ever will be a night when he'll say more than two words about himself, it'll be this one.

Chapter 24 - Dahrian

That thing she's doing with her mouth is threatening to push me over the edge, and I can't have that, not yet. "Come 'ere," I tell her as I give her hair a little tug, my voice rough with desire and my breathing ragged.

She lets go of my dick and looks up at me, the intensity in her eyes making all my restraint fall away. Gritting my teeth, I grab her by the upper arms, roughly pulling her up and onto my lap. And I need to be inside her so bad right now, but first I wrap one arm around her back and start kissing her breasts, making her grab onto my shoulders and let out a moan as I work two fingers into her pussy, rubbing her clit with my thumb as I slide them in and out, just the way she likes it.

I only stop when she digs her nails into my shoulders, actual, unrestrained moans starting to come out of her mouth.

Mad with desire, I pull my fingers out and I use my hand to slide myself inside her, the breath I hear her suck in and the mere feel of her making me grit my teeth with pleasure.

And she starts rocking back and forth, the way she pants as she slides up and down the shaft of my dick making me start to lose it.

I grab her by the waist and I lower myself back onto the pillows with her chest pressed to mine, I lock her in a tight grip and I start thrusting, making her suck in a sharp breath as her hands fly to grab onto the bedpost.

And she's moaning into my ear and I'm feeling her becoming desperate to meet my thrusts, but I'm hungry for more.

And I don't know if this is something she'd like, but I still find myself getting my fingers wet in her pussy and then sliding them into her ass, starting to fuck her with both my dick and my hand.

Now, that results in such a delicious string of moans that I almost fail to stop myself from talking dirty to her.

Instead, I grab her more tightly and I whisper into her ear, "She likes that?"

She doesn't pull away to look at me, but she does give me a couple of quick nods followed by a shaky little "Mmm."

And I know I won't get one, but I still ask, "Enough to earn me a little kiss?"

To my surprise, the very next moment, I have her mouth on mine and my lips are parting and our tongues are touching, stroking and twirling, making my heart throb and these shivers of desire run all over my body, my thrusts becoming more desperate with each passing second.

"Fuck," I hear her curse in a low voice as she breaks the kiss, her pussy tightening around me, "oh fuck."

It makes eagerness flood me, and I grab her even tighter, pressing my lips to her ear to urge in a breathless whisper, "Yes, come for me."

And she keeps moving, but it's only when I already feel myself being pushed over the edge that I realize that she's snapped out of it. That I've fucking ruined it.

*

When I start coming to, she's already getting me out of her and I'm fighting not to grumble, still flushed, panting and pissed that I let my eagerness get the better of me like that.

And she wraps the sheet around herself and my breathing's only starting to go back to normal, but expecting to be thrown out immediately, as per the 'rules', I move to start getting up.

But instead of pulling back to let me, she just shifts a little, as if to make herself more comfortable. And then she just keeps sitting there, in my lap, looking down as she starts playing with the folds in the sheet on her lap.

It makes my eyebrows pull down, but I sure as hell won't be complaining.

So I just push myself up a little, making sure I keep her on me, and I lean back against the pillow, putting one hand behind my head and the other casually on her waist.

I clear my throat. “So, Romanov,” I start, my voice still a little unsteady.

She quirks an eyebrow at me and I decide to do it, to sniff around this little thing I couldn’t put out of my head while I was back home. “I was gone for two whole weeks and you didn’t reach for another fuck toy?” I ask teasingly. “Should I be flattered?”

“Glad to see you’re the same arrogant ass,” she drawls, but she does roll her eyes at me, her lips tugging into a little smile.

“Lemme guess,” I say as I throw her a smirk, “I’m also an idiot.”

To my surprise, that earns me a suspicious little squint.

“What?” I demand, smiling and not letting her look away. “You think you have to say it for me to hear it?”

And I give her waist a little pinch, making her squirm and slap my hand away.

But then she turns serious, my ears immediately pricking up.

“Why *were* you gone?” she asks, flatly, as she looks down at the fabric she’s playing with.

“Had some stuff to take care of,” I say as I start stroking the smooth skin of her arm.

“Could you *be* any vaguer?”

That makes me turn my eyes back up to her, my eyebrows pulling down.

She’s a little flushed as she says, “It’s just… ‘Stuff to take care of’ could mean anything from doing your annual checkups to spending time with an old flame.” She pauses for a second before she adds, a little breathlessly, “For example.”

Old flame?

Frowning, I open my mouth to ask what she’s talking about.

But the next thing I know, she’s shifting in my lap, and I have her arms around my shoulders and her lips pressed to mine.

For a second, it makes my frown grow deeper, but then my mind goes blank and I’m sliding my tongue inside her mouth and wrapping my arms around her, all my focus back on her lips, her waist, her skin.

And she doesn’t stop kissing me, but now she’s touching me as well, her fingers brushing and her palms stroking the skin of my chest, my arms, my

neck. It feels so good, what she's doing to me, that it makes my heart throb and my muscles go limp all at the same time.

And what I need right now is to get rid of that sheet and feel her naked against me again, but I never get a second round so I can't be getting my hopes up like that.

Not until I feel it out.

"You keep that up, Romanov," I say as I pull away a little, and my voice is low and rough, but I make my tone as nonchalant as possible, "you'll just get yourself another pounding."

And I can see by the look in her eyes and the flush on her face that she was into it, but she just pulls away and frowns a little, seemingly snapping out of it.

Damnit, I think as I move my hands down to her waist.

Still, she doesn't get off me. And she doesn't stop tracing lines on my chest with her fingers, keeping my muscles limp and my skin rippling with pleasure.

"What's this?" she asks when she reaches the scar above my hip. And she doesn't look up. She just keeps tracing little circles around it.

"A bad memory," I say, teasingly, as I try to pull her to me.

She doesn't let me.

And she keeps touching me, but she also throws me this look.

And the look nudges me to say, "Just a little souvenir from a gáir."

She raises her eyebrows at me. "Gáir?" she asks before she turns her eyes back onto her fingers still brushing my chest.

It makes me blow a soft laugh through my nose when I realize that that word must not be a thing here. I put one arm behind my head and one hand on her waist, leaning my head on my bicep as I shamelessly take advantage of this extremely rare opportunity to scan her face without the risk of getting her fist in my mouth.

"Where I come from," I start to explain, my eyes dragging from her eyelashes to the curve of her jawline to that little Cupid's Bow, "there's not a lot of land with magic or resources left. So they divide the good parts equally, to make sure everyone has enough to go on. A gáir is what we call a person who takes the land from those weaker than them so they could live in luxury."

She looks up at me, finding me already staring at her, and she squints. "You were trying to report one of them?"

For a second, I just blink at her.

And I don't know what it is, that makes me tell the actual truth. A mix of incredulousness and defiance perhaps…

But I find myself letting out an amused scoff, grabbing her by the waist and pressing my forehead to hers, our lips almost touching. "I was trying to *steal* from him," I tell her with a smirk.

"Steal?" she echoes as she breaks herself free.

It makes me laugh. "I see I've gone and scandalized you, Duchess," I poke as I try to get my arms around her again. "Am I about to be thrown out the window?"

She fights me off and throws me a sober look. "What were you trying to steal? When was this?"

For a second, I just look at her, this bitterness suddenly flooding my mouth as I lean back against the pillows again, resting my hands on my lap. "Don't worry about it," I say, trying to keep my tone light, but failing a little. "I never went to jail for it. So technically, I'm not a *common criminal*," I drawl mockingly, "as the Overlord Ex Fiance would call me. You needn't fret for your reputation."

And I tear my eyes away from her, starting to feel observed somehow, and I busy myself with pounding the pillow behind me back into shape. But she doesn't let it go.

"But you did escape going to jail for a crime you actually committed?" she demands, making me turn back to her, frowning and resting my hands on my lap again.

Her eyes are narrowed, assessing.

And the look makes me at the same time defiant and squirming with the need to correct any false assumptions, so I make my voice flat, but I just tell her the truth, plain as day. "They don't throw kids in jail where I'm from. I was twelve, my brother was ill and I was stealing medicine for him."

It makes her eyes flash with surprise. "What?" she mouths as she leans a little forward, resting her palms on my chest and making all the defiance melt away. Then she swallows roughly and whispers, "And he…"

"Didn't survive," I snap, letting out an awkward little laugh. "Got into all that trouble for nothing."

What the fuck is wrong with me? And now she's going to start pitying me, I think as I start gritting my teeth.

To my surprise, she just looks at me for a second and then comes to lie on my chest, her right hand starting to brush my arm.

"What was he like?" she asks in a voice in which I find zero pity.

For a second, I stay silent, looking down at her hair spilling over my chest and her leg thrown over me, this intense warmth spreading through my chest.

"Well," I say in a pensive voice as I start stroking her upper arm, "the first thing you'd notice would definitely be the fucking *mane* of dark, hopelessly unruly hair. And he had this habit of starting to tell you a joke, realizing he'd forgotten the punchline, and then making you sit there as he started all over again." I pause for a second, frowning as a fresh pang of old pain shoots through me. "And he was kind and the illness, strangely, only made him kinder."

She pushes herself off my chest, making me have to suppress a grumble. "That must've been so difficult, losing him."

"Well," I say matter-of-factly, starting to stroke the porcelain skin of her neck and shoulders, "I had five other brothers I needed to focus on keeping alive, so I didn't have the luxury of lingering on it. Besides, even if I did…"

Pulling her to me, I lean in for a kiss, whispering, "It doesn't matter. It's all in the past now."

"I mean, yeah," she starts as she pulls away, her tone dead serious, "but it's also in the present. My father died years ago and I still carry him with me everywhere I go."

That makes me frown, but just as I open my mouth to ask about it, she shakes her head and says, "What I'm trying to say is, you can't just pretend something doesn't exist because it's painful."

"What do you think, I'm stupid?" I ask as I sit up straighter, my eyebrows pulling down. "Of course I know you can't pretend it doesn't exist. But you *can* make yourself strong enough for it not to affect you."

"Not to affect you?" she echoes, her eyebrows shooting up. And she sounds frustrated as she says, "Oh, like what happened with your ex? That must have *nothing* to do with your romantic choices."

For a second, there's silence during which my mind is buzzing and her face twisting into this expression of sudden realization and consequent panic.

"How do you know about my ex?" I demand in a low, serious voice.

She glances away before she says, hesitantly, "Ricky told me."

“No,” I growl, my mind running marathons as my frown grows deeper. “Ricky wouldn’t do that.”

There’s one long moment of silence during which she looks as if she’s trying to force herself to say something, making me hold my breath. “Maybe I got him drunk on Feinmann’s whiskey,” she finally says, quietly, and then raises her eyebrows, pressing her lips tight.

I push myself off the bed, making her double back to get out of my lap. “You did *what*?” I ask her, a growl in my voice and daggers in my eyes as I stand there, naked, in front of her bed.

And her eyes are rounding in what seems to be both shame and apology, but it’s starting to really hit me now, what this whole night really was, and I’m finding it harder and harder to control my anger.

I hear her get off the bed, but I’m already grabbing my clothes off the floor.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” she pleads as she tries to grab me by the arm.

I stop to shoot her a warning look, but it doesn’t scare her. “I really am,” she mutters.

I tear my eyes away and without throwing her another glance, I put on my clothes and I march out of her room, seething inside.

*

I find myself pacing in my tent without really remembering how I got there, eyes unseeing, teeth gritting and fists clenching.

Thinking about what just happened, back in her room, rewinding and rewinding and rewinding. And every time I rewind, I find something new, a fresh slap across the face.

Inviting me to her room.

That first question about the ‘old flame.’

Literally shutting me up by kissing me.

Fucking *kissing* me, being all cuddly and shit.

Worst of all, making me talk about my brother. My fucking *brother*. And I don’t talk about fucking feelings. That’s the whole fucking point of not doing serious.

It makes me let out a bitter laugh. Here I thought I’d be enjoying myself tonight, unwinding after stopping yet another one of my brother’s rampages, and finally getting to see and feel her again, this time someplace with minimal danger of being interrupted. Someplace I’d have an actual shot at getting her truly relaxed.

Exactly, my fox's voice booms from the shadows, teeth gritted and tone mocking all at once, *and it never* once *occurred to you that it was too good to be true.*

I stop pacing and he just keeps going. *When it should've occurred to you the moment she asked you to come to her room.*

He. Is. *Pissed*.

And it makes me feel both unsettled and drained all of a sudden.

"Yeah, well," I tell him as I come to sit on the bed, my voice dropping with fatigue as I run my hand over my face, "I was bone tired, I'd been gone for what seemed like a fucking eternity, and I just wanted…"

Yeah, you just wanted, he drawls mockingly. *And she invited you to her room and everything smelled of her and you were getting her undivided attention, and, well...* He lets out an angry scoff. *The boy got caught up in a fantasy, right?*

It makes me grit my teeth, what he's saying, it makes me burn with the need to shut him up as soon as possible.

But he seems to be in the middle of a rant, his voice taking on a disgusted note, *But* then*, then she started* openly *seducing you to get you to talk. And you… You just lay there and let her humiliate you.*

By the time he says that, my body is painfully tense and my head is threatening to burst so I just keep sitting there, gritting my teeth as I try to stop myself from going off the rails.

What? he pokes at me with poison in his voice. *Cat got your tongue?*

I force a flat, but determined voice when I say, "I think we need to talk about this a little later."

Weak, he insists, making me grit my teeth and clench my fists even harder. *You're just plain weak. That's how she got you to* show *your weakness in the first place.*

"*I said*," I snarl at him, "we'll talk about this later."

*

When I wake up the next day, I'm in no better mood than the one before. But the Fourth Game is tomorrow and I've found the situation worse than I left it when it comes to the tensions between Grimms and Fiains. I've even had to forbid my pack from drinking during the day, at least until we're still here. But that's not an actual solution and despite my mood, I at least need to be present.

So I take a seat in front of my tent, pretending to be on my phone. And the members of my pack all throw smiles when they see me wave, but no one comes to bother me.

Until my eyes dart up and I see Ricky walking down the plateau and straight for my tent.

Fuck. He's more perceptive than most of them. He'll notice there's something going on and then there will be questions.

Fucking questions about things I do *not* want to talk about.

And when he comes to a stop in front of me, making me raise my hand to shield my eyes from the sun, he's frowning. And the first words to come out of his mouth are, "Um, you okay?"

"All good," I say with a forced little smile.

That seems to appease him.

And for a second, I consider asking him how it happened exactly, that he let himself be interrogated about *my* private business. But that makes me instantly start to fume so I decide against it.

"Shoot," I just say.

"Is Brogan back from the homeland?" he asks as he throws a glance around the camp.

"She's scheduled to arrive tomorrow," I say, relieved it's something as simple as that he's come to ask, "a couple of hours before the Game."

But he presses his lips tight and then curses, "Goddamn it."

It makes me frown. It's not very often you can hear a word like that from Ricky's mouth. I lean a little forward. "What's up, mate? Can I help?"

"Well," he starts, obviously frustrated, "she said she'd give me my uniform by now. My last one got really damaged in the Third Game. And I wanted to do some training in the new one, so my hyena could get used to the scent."

I remember her mentioning she got them. That's weird. It's not like Brogan to forget about something like that.

"I think they're all in her tent," I say, motioning at the one next to mine.

Ricky just squints at me for a second. "You think she wouldn't mind?"

"I know it for a fact," I reply with determination in my voice.

And he breathes a sigh of relief, already moving to walk away. Then he stops and squints at me again.

"What?" I ask, forcing myself not to sound unwelcoming.

“I don’t know,” he says in a cheerful voice, making my muscles relax. “Strangely, I guess I’m even more nervous about the Games now. Now that I’ve experienced being the one to score the first point.”

For a second, I just look at him. Then I let out a low scoff and I find myself saying, “That’s how it goes. Makes you start *wanting*. And before you know it, you want even more, a lot more than you could ever get. And that’s when real trouble starts.”

Now, that makes him frown. “You sure you’re okay, Boss?”

“Do I look like I’m not?” I demand, my voice a little harsher than I meant to make it.

But that doesn’t seem to throw him off. He lowers himself into a crouch next to me. “Doesn’t sound like you’re talking about points at all,” he says, simply. “Care to tell me what you *are* talking about?”

I lean a little forward, locking eyes with him and shooting him a warning look.

He lets out a nervous chuckle, pushes himself off the ground and announces, “Gonna go get that uniform now.”

I get up as well, the plan being spending as much time as I can in my tent, where no one can bother me.

But it’s at that exact moment that I see O’Malley marching over to me.

“Hey, Boss,” he says nonchalantly, “Romanov’s looking for you.”

And just like that, my mind goes blank.

*

“You free?” O’Malley asks as I keep staring at him stupidly. “I saw that you were on your phone…”

She’s *here*?

For a second, dread and longing each fight for their own place in my mind and my body.

“No, that’s fine,” I mutter, swallowing around a growing lump in my throat.

It gets worse when I spot her, O’Malley pointing out where my tent is and her starting to approach me, fast.

I don’t know if I can do this, I think as my heart starts pounding.

“Hey,” she says as she slows to a stop in front of me, looking up at me all formal and embarrassed.

“Hey,” I echo, flatly, folding my arms and forcing myself to channel a rock.

Just a plain rock, no feelings, nothing.

"So, um," she starts, hesitantly, as she keeps trying to lock eyes with me.

And I'm not straight-out refusing to look at her, but I'm not letting her put me under her spell either.

Finally, she gives up and starts talking. "Look, I just wanted to apologize in person. For what happened last night. If you're angry, you have every right to be." She pauses for a second and I can tell it's not easy for her to say it, but she does. "It was stupid, what I did."

And there's this overwhelming urge to talk back, to tell her *exactly* how stupid it was, but I stifle it.

A rock, I chant to myself, staying silent.

And I can tell she's confused by my lack of reaction, but she doesn't let it stop her. "Um," she keeps going, "if you're wondering why it even happened, I guess I let my curiosity get the better of me, and Ricky was there and, well, there's really no excuse—"

"It's fine," I cut in, forcing a finality into my voice.

Because the longer she's here, the closer I get to the brink of unraveling. "Now, if that'll be all…" And I have to force myself to turn my back to her, but I do, moving for my tent.

She walks around me, looking up at me with those eyes of hers and making me double back, letting out a low groan.

"So you accept the apology?" she asks in a soft, fervent voice that pins me in place. "Because, seriously, it's the first and last time I'll let myself do anything like *that*."

And when I glance at them, there's this plea in her eyes that makes it impossible for me not to offer something or to soften my voice as I say, "I believe you. I know you're a good person, Romanov."

"So we're good?" she asks, the look in her eyes turning brighter.

But now I'm feeling myself start to fume. Comforting, I've just found myself *comforting* her.

"As I said," I reply, a touch of roughness in my voice again, "it's fine."

I see a frown crease her forehead and I feel all my efforts at channeling the rock start failing, so I add, more coldly than ever, "Now, thanks for stopping by. See ya."

"When? Where?" I hear her ask, in a weird little voice, as I lift the flap of my tent.

It makes all my muscles tense up and my teeth grit, but I finally throw her a look over my shoulder and say, “Don’t know. Around.”

And I disappear into the tent without actually looking at her. I can’t bring myself to. So I don’t know how she takes it, with a shrug or a frown or whatever. I just hope she did take the hint, because I’m not sure I could bring myself to literally tell her I can’t see her anymore.

But once I’m inside, I cling to this determination. That I won’t even be thinking about it.

And I throw myself on my bed, preferring the darkness over the sun glaring outside.

And I know what it is that I’ve just now decided and I know he’ll probably only get me *more* worked up, but I fail to stop the urge to poke at my fox.

“Do you approve?” I demand, bitterness lacing my every word. “Are we good now?”

And I know he heard me. He was present, his ears pricked up, the whole time she was here. But now, there’s only silence. Silence that’s fucking pissing me off.

“I thought you wanted me to act,” I say, my teeth gritting.

Silence.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?” I demand as I push myself off the bed and start pacing the tent, my chest heaving with rage. “In the name of Lycan, last night, you were foaming at the fucking mouth about this.”

I’ve sobered up, he finally says, the touch of ice in his voice making me stop midstep. *And besides… it’s helped me realize something.*

And I’m still standing there, panting with rage, but I find myself *needing* to know what the fuck he’s talking about. “Yeah, *what*?”

There’s a second of silence before he says, simply, *It’s out of my hands.*

“Out of *your* almighty hands?” I snap at him, letting out a low, frustrated laugh.

Silence.

“Nah,” I say with an angry wave of my hand, “don’t believe you. This has happened before.” And I keep pacing, growing angrier by the second. “You went nuts after Aisling cheated on me and I couldn’t speak to you for a week.”

To my surprise, he lets out a bitter little laugh. *Did you ever have to literally hide me from* Aisling*? From* anyone*, for that matter?*

There's a second of tense silence as my anger dissipates, leaving this hollowness behind. I stop pacing, feeling my throat close.

"I won't be seeing her anymore," I finally say, my voice low and breathless and dull somehow.

Fine, he snaps. *You won't.*

His voice turns pensive when he adds, *But it's too late now. What I feared most… It's already happened. And you know it.*

My heart skips a beat, leaving this vague but all-pervading fear behind. I don't say anything. I don't even move. And he slinks back into the shadows, but I just keep standing there, my shoulders slumping and my eyebrows pulling down as his words keep echoing in my head, over and over and over again.

Just not the ones he said just now. The ones he said quite a while ago, back when her and I had our first ever rendezvous.

Chapter 25 - Nyx

The day of the Game, I wake up in such a terrible mood, it's all I can do to stop myself from unraveling. I busy myself with doing my rituals, cleaning out my room, organizing my class notes.

And it's been almost twenty four hours since I went to his tent to apologize, but the words refuse to stop echoing through my mind.

Don't know. Around.

And every time, I try to swat them the hell away from myself, but they just keep coming back, bringing this coldness with them that seems to seep straight into my bones.

How horrible it is, I bitch to myself, that right after he makes me let myself go so much, I end up fucking kissing him, *this* happens.

Angry, it would've been so much better if he were angry. It's this sudden and total indifference that's making me want to pull my fucking hair out.

So when it's time to leave for the Fourth Game, I almost forget I still haven't told brother darling about the change of plans.

And I'm finding it hard to control myself and my anger at my own despicable behavior today, but it's not like I have a choice. Dressed in my uniform, I go down the stairs and into the Common Room, where I find him and Ricky talking in hushed voices.

As soon as they spot me, they go silent and Nikolay scowls at me. "What're *you* looking at?"

I ignore him and turn to Ricky instead, practically hissing at him, “Don’t you have to get going?”

He just blinks at me for a second. “Sure, Nyx,” he says when he snaps out of it. And he gets up and starts walking away. “Dahrian’s probably waiting for me anyway.”

Just the mention of his name makes a knife twist in my stomach.

But I force myself to dismiss it and turn back to my sour-faced brother. After all, I have the Game in less than an hour. So I clear my throat and I say, forcing a flat voice, “I came to tell you I won’t be walking to the Game with you after all.”

Nikolay just looks at me for a second. “I couldn’t care less,” he spits out.

I turn on my heel and start walking away.

“Did you hear me?” he shouts after me. “I couldn’t care less.”

But I just keep walking, feeling as if I’m wading through some kind of bad dream.

Unthinking and restless, I go down the stairs, but just as I’m about to walk out of Lilith Tower, I spot him moving for the main door with one of his sycophants.

Max.

And before I can stop myself, I’m already walking over to him. Pissed, I’m so pissed that he’s pushing himself into the picture with the land like this.

He spots me, stops and waves his ‘friend’ away, squinting.

“Might I have a word?” I ask as I come to stand in front of him.

And I don’t really know what I’m expecting, but it’s definitely not the simple, sweet, “Of course” that he gives me. “Let’s walk to the Game together.”

I frown, but I nod. And I let him open the door for me, and I walk out and into the crowd outside, with him at my tail. It’s the Dame Gothel statue we’re headed for, from where we’ll be following the crowd into the next Game arena.

“Look, Max,” I say when he falls into step with me, forcing a polite voice, “I don’t think there's any need for actual hostility between the two of us. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Who’s being hostile?” he asks.

And he throws me such a confused look, it leaves *me* confused for a second as well. “I *know* you helped Nikolay restart the sale process,” I

finally say, my anger at him starting to surface again.

"I…" He shrugs, throwing me an apologetic look. "I may have pulled a few strings, yes."

"Well," I say, fighting not to grit my teeth, "I need you to tell me what you asked for in return."

"In return?" he echoes, throwing me this funny little smile. "Sure, we're no longer together, but I did it to *help*, Anastasya."

For a second, I stay silent, fighting the urge to yell. Then I make myself take a deep breath.

If he's going to be like this… "Well," I say, shooting straight for his weak spot, "as a prince, I'd think you'd be able to do more than find my brother new buyers."

As usual, this gets results. "Fine," he snaps and he makes me stop just as the crowd reaches the spot where the Elevator is hiding. Then his eyes soften again and he throws me a warm smile. "I didn't want to do this before it became official, but…"

I hold my breath.

"Once you get the sale papers," he asks with one eyebrow quirked at me, "whose name will you see on them?"

It makes me clench my jaw, knowing what he'll say even before he says it.

He doesn't wait for me to ask. "Maximillian Aalders the Second," he leans to whisper.

And by the time he pulls away, I've at least regained my power of speech. But I'm balling my hands into fists as I say through gritted teeth, "They're selling it to *you*?"

He just looks at me for a second and then nods.

"But you don't have that kind of money," I protest, barely registering the Elevator rising from the ground and the people bumping into us, forcing us inside.

"I do *now*," he replies matter-of-factly.

Oh, so that's what the audience with the King was probably about.

The interaction makes me so angry, I find myself surprised when the Elevator door opens and we walk out into the Entrance Hall.

For a second, it distracts me, making me look around, wondering if the Fourth Game will be held *in* the castle itself. And that's when I spot him.

Dahrian, in the crowd to my left, slowing down to throw me this weird look.

It makes my heart start pounding. I don't keep walking. I *can't* keep walking, my head threatening to burst with everything that's going on.

"Hey," I hear Max say and I snap out of it, turning my eyes back onto him. He's frowning at me. "Didn't you say you care what happens with the land?" He lets out an incredulous little laugh. "And here I am, serving you the ideal solution on a silver platter, no strings attached."

For a second, I just look at him, my mind still buzzing and my anger only growing less controlled. "I want you to back down, Max, got it?" I say in a warning voice.

"Come on, cupcake," he says as he takes a step closer. "It's a good thing I'm doing, for all of us."

The nickname and the way he says it all make blood boil in my veins. And I fail to stop myself. I get in his face, fangs flashing, and I drawl, "If you don't back down, Max, I swear to fucking Lilith herself, I'm going to *hunt* you down and I'm going to *drain* you, and then…" I grit my teeth. *"Then* I'm going to leave your pitiful, rotting corpse somewhere no one will *ever* find." I pause to look deeper into his eyes. "Understood?"

And I can tell he's taken aback, but then my phone pings and I automatically whip it out.

"F12, now," the text reads. The text from Howe.

For a second, I just blink at it, trying to stop myself from reacting to it in any way. But the next thing I know, I'm walking straight to F12.

"Hey, where're you going?" I hear Max demand.

"Bathroom."

There's a second of silence before he yells out, "The bloody Game's about to begin."

I don't even reply. I'm barely controlling my anger, and I'm actually looking forward to seeing what this other asshole wants from me.

*

When I close the door to F12 behind me and turn to face him, I'm seething, opening my mouth to ask him how the fuck he thinks it's okay to text me *at this time*.

But he's already coming at me, this primal anger twisting his face as he slams me against the door and pins me in place with one muscled forearm

across my chest, my eyebrows pulling down and my hands flying to his shoulders to push him away.

The grip only tightens, while the other hand moves to roughly work its way between my legs. “Hey,” I shout at him, using all four limbs to try to fight him off, feeling at the same time confused, thrilled to be able to blow off steam and turned on by him winning the fight. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Fucking you in that uniform,” he says through gritted teeth as he manages to get his hand where he wants it, aggressively unzipping my pants as he stares into my eyes with that weirdly intense, angry look in his.

I block his hand before it can slide under. “You wish,” I drawl, and my jaw is clenching but I’m breathless, eager to get his reaction. *Anything* but indifference, please.

He presses me tighter to the door with his forearm, gets in my face and growls, “I don’t *wish*. I make it happen.”

It makes me start burning up, that rough finality in his voice that I’ve heard once before. And I let him get his hand between my legs and he starts working me with his fingers, roughly, and it still makes me go wet and a moan almost escapes me, but I want more. I want all of it, I want all of his anger, however much I can get.

So I find myself starting to put up a fight again, my teeth gritted as I say, “Get your filthy hands off me.”

At that, he abruptly lets go of me, shoots me an angry look and grabs me by the ass with both hands, pressing my crotch to his, so I can feel exactly how hard he is. “Oh you pretend you don’t,” he growls in my ear, “but you want it, don’t you, you manipulative little vixen. You *want* my dick inside you.”

Fuck, I think to myself, getting more turned on by the second. I muster all my strength, I fight him off and I shove him, hard, so he stumbles back a little. “We have the Game, you *asshole*,” I say through gritted teeth.

His chest heaving, for a second, he just throws daggers at me. “What did you call me?” comes a breathless, menacing whisper.

It makes me want to lick my lips. “Asshole,” I repeat, slowly and angrily mouthing the word.

He grits his teeth, lust and anger twisting his face. “Yeah?” Then he turns me around like I’m a rag doll, marches me to the nearest table with my back

pressed to his, and pushes my head down with his hand to bend me over. “You’re about to start singing a different tune.”

And I’m getting choked-up with desire, but I still snap, “Yeah, well, you’re all talk.”

I hear him expel an angry breath, right before he strips me, does two rough kicks with his knee to spread my legs and then wraps his hand around my neck. I bite my lip and I dig my nails into the table, the anticipation making me lose my breath. But the next thing I know, he’s already pushing himself inside me, more roughly than ever, and I’m letting out a shaky breath immediately followed by a moan.

“Now that’s more like it,” he leans to drawl through gritted teeth. “Just with a lot more *begging*.” And he takes his dick out of me only to forcefully start sliding it up and down my pussy. “And beg you *will*, Romanov,” he keeps drawling, the roughness in his voice making shivers of pleasure run down my spine, “beg me to fuck you harder, and beg me to fill your hot little pussy with my cum till it can’t take no more.”

“Yes, please,” I find myself breathing out, eager to get him to make good on that.

He grabs me by the hair and pulls my cheek to his lips, his voice rough and breathless as he echoes, “Please? Didn’t know you could be such a good, *good* girl.”

Oh fuck, I think as the words make me go even more desperate for him. Then he finally pushes himself back inside me and starts thrusting, one hand still grabbing my hair while the other one starts roaming over my back and my ass and my chest, squeezing so hard, it hurts, but feeling so good, it makes my eyes start rolling back.

“Fuck,” I curse in a low voice as my body urges me to get him deeper inside me.

“What’s that?” he demands as he stops abruptly, his breathing ragged. “Couldn’t hear you over all the *moaning*.”

“*Harder*,” I plead, no longer giving a single fuck, “fuck me harder.”

And that makes him let out this dragged-out groan, tightening his grip on me as he starts thrusting even faster.

But it’s at the very next moment that my entire body stiffens, like someone threw a bucket of cold water at me.

A smell. What’s that smell?

*

Suddenly panicking, I squirm to make him stop and he gets out of me, stiffening as we both rush to get dressed and turn to the door.

And there he is, standing in the doorway with his hand on the doorknob, staring at us with this indecipherable look in his eyes.

"Max," I breathe out, feeling hot blood rush to my face.

And it's then that I realize I still haven't pulled my pants all the way up, but the next thing I know, I have Dahrian, fully dressed, pressing his back into me, his broad shoulders shielding me entirely.

I grab onto his uniform, pressing my forehead to him, and his body seems to be vibrating with rage, but it's so comforting, the warmth spreading from it, that I get this urge to keep hiding behind it.

Gritting my teeth, I decide not to be a little bitch.

And I quickly fix my uniform and I step out from behind him, catching this pissed-off frown he throws me before I force myself to look my ex fiance in the eye.

"Taking a break from looking for the bathroom?" he asks, his voice not mocking at all, but still making Dahrian let out a growl from behind my back.

I sense him move forward and I block him with my arm as I keep my eyes on Max.

It's making my eyebrows pull down, the way he's acting, strangely calm and collected, but the next thing I know, there's Ricky running past the open door behind him, spotting us, doubling back and barging in to say, "Boss, everyone, come on, the Game's about to start."

And once he's done, I see his eyebrows pull down as his eyes sweep over the three of us.

But then Dahrian pushes past me and starts marching over to him, without throwing me a single glance.

My mind feverishly blank and my body restless and limp at the same time, I watch the two of them walk out the door and disappear to the left.

When I snap out of it, Max is still there, looking at me.

I move to push past him, but he grabs me by the wrist and leans to whisper in my ear, "I think we need to talk, Anastasya. First thing after the Game."

I just look at him. And I did hear what he just said, but my mind refuses to linger on it, *at all*. I break myself free and start rushing after Dahrian, wanting to catch him before the Game, *needing* to catch him before the

Game, the way he wouldn’t even look at me just now making me feel an unbearable restlessness.

Chapter 26 - Dahrian

I sense it when she starts closing the distance between us, but I just keep walking down the hallway with the rest of the players, all my energy and focus being spent on trying not to lose my shit. Calming my heavy breathing, releasing the tension in my muscles, trying to stop my mind from imploding.

Not think about it, not think about any of it, that's what I need to do right now.

So it makes me breathe a sigh of relief, when one of the doors ahead opens and out comes the Archon, waiting for us to file inside.

If this were happening under any other circumstances, I'd probably feel surprise at the fact we're actually going to be having an indoor Game.

Right now, it fails to interest me in the least.

But the look on Brogan's face when it's my turn to step inside, *that* gives me pause. She looks… absent somehow.

I stop and I move a little to the side of the door, letting everyone else walk through and all the while making sure my eyes don't land on a certain someone. Two certain someones, to be more exact.

But the Archon is already throwing me a funny glance so I lean in to ask, "Is everything okay?"

It makes me frown, when she squints at me. "Why do you ask?"

Is it all in my head? Am I projecting?

“No reason,” I say.

Still, I get my fox to take a subtle whiff of her, to see if any red flags come up.

Nothing.

I shake my head and I move for the door, but she stops me.

“Good luck,” she says, simply, when I turn to her.

I give her a nod, but I fail to force myself to throw in a smile.

And once I walk inside, for a second, my mind busies itself by scanning the room.

The barely lit, *enormous* fucking classroom that looks more like a crossbreed between an arena and a courtroom, with the rectangular ring in the middle and the stone steps where the audience is already sitting surrounding it from all sides, everything in grim-looking, dark and bare stone.

But as soon as I feel myself nudged to join the other players at the center of the ring, my eyes dart back to *her*. And all I see is this stiffness in her pale face.

I come to stand beside Ricky, who throws me a funny look, but I just give him a nod, failing to stop the urge to tip my head to the right, where she’s standing, and checking who’s standing beside her.

And it gives me some pleasure at least, to see she’s far away from that fucking asshole, but *that*, in turn, only makes me feel even more pissed. Because it makes me remember the way she said ‘Max’ when just now she spotted him, and the way she stopped me from coming at him, it all making a knife twist in my stomach.

The Game is about to start, my fox’s voice booms inside my head just as Brogan comes to the center of the ring with us and motions for the Pied Piper and Gleason to shake hands to activate the Box. *You should calm the fuck down,* he warns.

“This is the best I can do,” I tell him, my teeth gritting with effort.

Do better, he snarls at me. *Or risk* me *going off the rails as well.*

That shuts me up, making me realize what a reckless asshole I’ve been since the night before last, when she invited me to her room.

And I can’t fucking believe it, that I allowed it to come this far.

I allowed seeing her walking with that asshole — not even touching, for crying out loud — send me into a fucking spiral, failing to stop myself from

going to show her she's *mine* and *no one else's*, not even a *day* after I said I wouldn't be seeing her again.

I allowed her to wrap me around her fucking finger, making me follow one thousand six hundred and forty two goddamn rules, while tricking me into abandoning the *only* fucking rule that *I* have.

And let's not forget, I allowed myself to stop paying attention to anything other than *her,* I curse as I force myself to get my head back in the game.

Because the Archon is already flinging Hourglass up in the air and taking a seat in the chair with the Box in her hands.

I fix my eyes on Hourglass, working on steadying my breathing, my muscles tensing up in anticipation.

It flips and the sand starts running.

The next thing I know, I have this urge to look down, only to see there's a grid flashing on the floor beneath my feet.

Chapter 27 - Nyx

It's not as soon as the sand starts running and the grid appears that I look away from the Archon. I do it only after I see her close her eyes. I don't like the menacing glance she threw Nikolay, just now, as she was passing him in the audience, making him squirm in his seat. And there's someone else here that my eyes keep getting drawn to.

But the Game's started and it's clear we each have to step inside one of the rectangles, so I take one, and so does everyone else, in silence.

And the next thing I know, there are walls snapping up from the floors, four dark stone walls enclosing me in a room twice as long as it is wide, no windows and only three closed doors on the other side.

For a second, it makes me wonder how the audience will be able to watch this, but then a stone pillar springs right in front of me, another hourglass on top, and the middle of the floor stretching between me and the doors starts weirdly shaking. And all of a sudden, at least the third of its length is no longer the floor, it's a punji trap, seemingly no bottom but lots and lots of metal spikes shooting up.

I frown, waiting for more stuff to appear, but then my ears prick up and my eyes dart to the hourglass only to see the grains of sand start trickling through its neck.

For a second, that downright confuses me. I'll be playing this game alone? There'll be no unwelcome distractions in the form of men who try to

fuck me one minute and completely ignore me the other?

And I move to explore the room a little, to start trying to figure out what I'm supposed to do here, when I sense something behind my back and all my muscles stiffen again.

But when I turn around, it almost makes me stumble back into the punji trap, finding myself staring back.

My frown growing deeper, I just walk a slow circle around the body identical to mine, from the mane of black hair to the combat boots on her feet.

She, or it, or whatever, lets me, not moving a muscle. And I don't know if I'm supposed to touch her, so I don't.

But I do whisper, "What are you?"

To my surprise, she gives me a little smile, a somewhat scared one, lifts her finger at me and says, "Only one."

It makes my eyebrows pull down. "One *what*?"

"Only one," comes the same answer.

"Fine," I snap, "but what does that mean?"

"Only one."

Feeling myself start to get angry, I take a deep breath and I turn to the three doors. I guess she's telling me only one of those is right.

But how am I supposed to know which, I wonder as my eyes drag down their identical wooden surfaces.

I start walking around the room, looking, the girl following me around, but not saying anything.

I find that there's a chandelier hanging off the ceiling that I haven't noticed before.

I lean over the edge of the trap and inspect the spikes shooting upwards. Sharp. They're fucking sharp.

I check the walls, finding the stone too slippery to hold onto, at all. Made from some special material.

And I find that the stone pillar actually has a stone bowl at the top, with two hollows, one at each side of the hourglass. Weird. Don't know what to think about *that*.

But by the time I'm done inspecting, the hourglass is telling me I don't have a lot more time.

So, despite not knowing what the Game is even about, I come to stand in front of the trap, opposite the first door from the left, I take a deep breath

and I jump.

And I land on my feet, right on the other side, pushing myself up immediately and grabbing the doorknob to try to get out.

I do manage to open the door, but there's only blackness on the other side and when I walk through…

I just come out the other side, facing the same room, just with one less door and the punji trap leaving less footing between its edge and the wall with the door.

What the fuck, I curse as I stare at the empty wall where the first door to the left was.

And I glance at the girl standing to my right, that scared little smile on her lips as she lifts her finger again. "Only one," she repeats.

Does she not think about the doors?

Maybe I have to get *her* through, it occurs to me.

And I let my eyes sweep over the room once again, taking a hesitant breath as I look up and at the chandelier.

Without hesitation, I grab the girl and I hoist her over my shoulder. And my muscles are already straining, but I jump onto the pillar with her, I take a deep breath and I kick my boots off the stone.

We fly through the air, the girl and I, and I grab onto the chandelier while midjump and I propel myself even farther, finally landing with her in front of the second door.

I don't hesitate. Putting the girl down, I pull the doorknob and I push her through.

She disappears and the blackness behind the door shimmers a little, making my heart beat a little faster.

Was that it, I think to myself. And I can't be sure, but I have to give it a try. So I step through the door myself.

Only to find myself in the very same situation I was in a moment ago. Standing on the other side of the trap, the girl to my right, staring at a single door on the other side, now with *zero* footing before the spikes start.

Fuck, I curse with gritted teeth. Fuck. Fuck.

"So you're just dead weight, aren't you?" I turn to snap at the girl, hating how scared she looks.

But it's then that the stone pillar occurs to me. And I walk up to it, frowning, my eyes darting from the smooth stone surface of the bowl to the only remaining door ahead, "Only one" echoing in my mind.

Blood Magic. I'm supposed to use Blood Magic for this? To make the two of us into one so we could walk out the third door?

I can't fucking believe this, I think as I start pacing left and right, watching the grains of sand keep trickling, reminding me of how little time I have left.

Never have I ever encountered an example of a Game that forced you to use a certain type of Magic.

But of course, that's just my luck, I think with gritted teeth, my hands balling into fists. Now, if I don't do it, I'll lose the Game and that's it for me. But if I do, I'll have Nikolay, Mother and Lilith knows who else at my back again.

I inhale deeply and I decide I *won't* be using fucking Mind Magic to do this. I won't be forced into using it.

And besides, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I just need to open all the doors and the 'only one' working.

So I walk up to the trap again, to assess it once again. Then I walk as far back as I can, take a deep breath and start running, kicking myself off the floor as soon as I'm just close enough.

And for a second, I find myself flying straight towards the third door, already picturing myself flinging it open.

But then the spikes beneath me start shooting further up, and I do a flip in the air to avoid them and get higher, but once I do the three-sixty and my eyes land back on them, I'm falling straight onto their sharp tips.

And there's this tug I feel somewhere behind my navel and I realize that the Box is about to zap me out of the Game.

But the next thing I know, the silence is getting switched out for fucking chaos, I'm crashing onto solid ground back in the room in which we started the Game, and there's a stampede of people around me.

Wincing, I push myself off the ground and jump to my feet, my mind struggling to comprehend what's going on, mostly because of all the people and shifters in their animal forms running around, scared, some of them casting magic at the only entrance into the room.

Have we been locked in, I think as dread starts seeping into my bones.

What the fuck is going on?

My eye darts to the Archon's chair, finding the Pied Piper standing in front of it with a pissed-off look on her face. Frowning, I see the Archon seemingly trying to pull something out of the Box. The way she's failing —

her hand twitching — suggests that the Pied Piper is using Mind Magic on her.

I guess she has things under control, I think as my head snaps to where Nikolay was sitting, finding him splayed on the ground, panting and looking bewildered, blood trickling out of his nose, his ears, his eyes.

Holy shit, I curse as I rush over to him. “Nikolay. What’s wrong? What happened?” I demand, fighting the urge to shake the answers out of him.

“It just stopped,” he says. “And then the Archon…” He breaks off, the look in his eye wild and absent all at once. “I don’t know what she’s trying to do.”

Just as he says that, I hear panicked yells from the people behind me and I stand up, turning around with my muscles clenching in anticipation.

And I see these people dragging the Archon out of her chair as the Pied Piper watches, but my mind doesn’t linger.

Because there’s Dahrian’s fox stalking over to me, its eyes fixed on mine.

I freeze.

“Get away from her,” I hear Max yell out.

But the next moment, there’s chaos, the fox jumping to land between me and the people around me, Nikolay scrambling to get out from under my feet, Max and a lot of the others lunging at the fox, the fox snarling and snapping its teeth as it keeps pressing me back and away from everyone else.

Are we all just going to die here, I think to myself just as Ricky appears from the crowd and shouts, “Dahrian.”

And the fox snarls at him, making him double back, white as a sheet, but then it shifts back into a human in a tattered, bloodied uniform. It remains standing there for a second, turns to push past me without throwing me a glance and practically rips the door out of the doorframe, marching out and letting the others start spilling through as well.

*

Trying not to think at all, but still more rattled than I’ve been in ages, I make my way to the top of Grimm Tower, where they’ve taken the Archon.

“I’m sorry, I’m just not at liberty to say,” I hear the Pied Piper’s mousy assistant’s voice even before I walk through the door. “For now, at least.”

I take a deep breath and I step into the anteroom. There, I find almost all the players and professors waiting, all the armchairs already occupied and even some plain chairs brought out. I pause for a second and I see people

nodding at me, and I nod as well, but my eyes immediately dart to Dahrian, who's standing leaned against the wall with his arms folded, eyes fixed somberly ahead.

"And what're we supposed to do until you are?"

Finding a chair near the entrance, I shift my focus onto the person asking the question. A Grimm talking to the assistant, who's got her back turned to the door into the Pied Piper's office. Closed door.

"Listen, everyone," she says as she scans the room in front of her, obviously uncomfortable but pushing through it, "we'll figure out what happened and we'll make sure everyone who was still in the Game when this happened, *stays* in the Game. Alright?"

At that, a low murmur, a content one, spreads through the room, making my eyebrows pull down. The Grimm goes back to his seat and the assistant gets back in the office, closing the door behind her.

What the… Do they really only care about the results?

And my eyes automatically dart to Dahrian, but he's not throwing a single glance in my direction, or any direction at all, still staring ahead with that somber look on his face.

But just as I'm about to look away, his gaze flits to the door behind me and I see him grit his teeth.

My nose tells me it's Max even before I see him walk past me in his most official manner.

And he goes straight for the door into the Pied Piper's office, gives it a light knock and gets invited in, just like that. Of course.

"Hey," that Grimm yells out as he gets out of his chair again, the girl next to him grabbing his wrist to pull him back down. "What the hell is he doing?" he asks as he turns to her.

I see the assistant poke her head through the door, saying, "I'm sorry. Only the prince for now."

I hear shifting and my eyes dart back to Dahrian, who's not leaning against the wall anymore. He's standing with his arms flung to his sides, looking menacing as fuck.

Still, he just keeps standing there.

A couple of minutes of almost total silence and I hear the door open again.

"Thank you," Max says as he walks out. "And yes, I'll get right on it."

And as he moves to leave the room, he throws a glance at Dahrian, smirking, and I see Dahrian grit his teeth.

For a moment, I think he'll lunge, but the next, he's back to leaning against the wall, staring ahead.

Max keeps walking and smirking, only throwing me a glance in passing, but coupled with the tip of his head to the door, it lets me know he thinks it's time for that little chat, as he said earlier.

And the very thought of it makes my fucking stomach twist and I do hesitate for a couple of long moments.

But it seems like an overall idiotic idea, to not even try to find out what he wants from me.

So I get up and I do try not to attract too much attention, but of course it's *this* time that that fucking Howe looks in my direction.

This funny, angry little squint, he throws me, as I fight not to run the fuck out of the room.

*

I find Max waiting for me outside the Tower.

To my surprise, he's no longer smirking. In fact, the look in his eyes is downright soft. And as soon as I come to a stop in front of him, it's in a gentle voice that he says, "Your brother will be fine."

"I know, I've made sure of it," I snap. "What do you want?"

"Just to talk about what happened."

And he motions at the path leading to one of the little groves with a bench inside.

"What's it to you?" I ask, not trying at all to make my voice less harsh as I force myself to fall into step with him. "We're not together anymore."

"I care about you, cupcake," he says simply. "And I know this is not you."

I can't believe that he'd use the nickname once again, but that's not what really bothers me. "This is not me?" I snap. "What the hell are you even talking about?"

He raises his eyebrows at me. "Getting involved with a guy like that?" He clicks his tongue. "Come on, you used to have principles, ambition, good taste..."

Guy like that? "Let's make one thing clear," I drawl as I keep walking after him. "It's not *your* fucking business, who *I* choose to fuck."

He turns to look at me. "*Fuck*?" He stops just as we reach the little grove, making me follow suit.

"Anastasya…" And his face turns serious as he says, slowly as if to a half-wit, "I just found you getting *railed*. In some *filthy classroom*. *Minutes* before the Game."

I feel blood rush to my cheeks, but he doesn't wait for a reaction. His eyes narrowing, he asks, "That's… *normal* to you?"

"What if it is?" I snap at him.

"*Fuck me harder*, huh?" he replies as he gets in my face, his nostrils now flaring.

I ball my hands into fists, my mind threatening to implode at the very thought of him having heard that.

"And don't you think," he drawls as he lifts a finger at me, "even for a second, that I didn't hear the filth you let *him* spew into *your* ear."

It makes me want to snap his fucking neck. "Let me guess," I rush to jump in, fighting not to start fucking yelling, "the moment we finish this conversation, you'll be running to my mother with that?"

To my surprise, he shoots me a confused look, taking a step back as he slides his hands into his pockets.

"No, I won't be telling anyone," he says in a lower, more serious voice, making my eyebrows shoot up. "I'll keep it all to myself and I'll give you a little time to think. *Really* think about your future and how you imagine it." He pauses for a second. "You know what I think will happen when you do?"

I let out an angry scoff. "*Please*, tell me."

"You'll come to realize, Anastasya," he keeps going, ignoring my tone, "that you've let some lowlife mess with your brain and wreak *absolute* havoc in your *entire* life."

For a second, I just blink at him, scrambling to find something to snap back and finding… *nothing*.

He takes a deep breath, gets a little closer and gently takes my wrist in his hand, "But you'll also come to realize you're much luckier than you ever even knew."

"Really?" I drawl mockingly, still so pissed but starting to feel so much more confused as well.

"Yes, really," he insists as he takes my hand in his. "Because I love you, cupcake. And I'm a forgiving man. Despite everything that's happened —

and there's been a lot, mind you…" He pauses to give me an even softer look. "I'm still here, waiting for you to snap out of it and come back to me."

Fuming, I break my hand free. For a second, I consider getting into it, but the very thought makes me feel a flood of fatigue.

And he just gives my upper arm a little squeeze, throws me another warm smile, turns on his heel and walks away.

For a second, I just keep standing there, watching him leave. Am I going fucking crazy? It *is* true that he witnessed me go ballistic on him for trying to help, right before he found the two of us like that, when we should've already been at the Game.

And that's just today. I can't let myself forget about my despicable behavior with Ricky the night before last. Feeling a scream coming on, I dart into the grove and I throw myself onto the stone bench.

But I don't get even a moment of peace before my eyes dart to the opening and I see *him* walk in.

Dahrian.

A pissed off look on his face if ever I saw it.

Chapter 28 - Dahrian

As soon as I walk in, her eyes dart up to me and I feel myself start to unravel.

I inhale deeply, my hands balling into fists and my teeth gritting, and I start walking up to her.

This is your last chance, boy, my fox warns from the shadows. *Just tell her how you feel and let's be done with it, please.*

"Oh, that's exactly what I'm doing," I say with this nasty little smile.

And I enjoy it, when I see her stiffen, fighting not to frown.

"Cupcake, huh?" I ask when I come to stand in front of her, my arms folding, my voice clear and flat despite this thrumming in my chest.

She gets up off the bench, now actually frowning. "You eavesdropped?"

I just look at her for a second. "You're right," I say, shrugging my shoulders and proceeding in a mocking voice. "I should've just waited for you to be done with Prince Charming, gotten him drunk, manipulated him into answering all my questions… Right?"

And I stare deeper into her eyes, my teeth gritting and my nostrils flaring.

For a second, she just looks at me, her face flushing with shame. "You said it was fine," she finally urges.

I find myself taking an angry step closer. "It doesn't fucking matter," I say through gritted teeth, fighting this urge to grab her, "because you just went and made it so much fucking worse."

And I keep standing there, holding my breath and looking at her looking at me in wonder.

“What the fuck’re you talking about?” she demands, narrowing her eyes at me.

It makes me let out a frustrated laugh, running my hand over my face so I can have a second without having to look into those eyes.

“This thing right here?” I say, in a relatively flat voice, when I lock eyes with her again. “You and I? Haven’t I made it *clear as fucking day*,” I demand, having to fight not to raise my voice, “I only ever do casual?”

For a second, she just looks at me with a pale face. Then she shakes her head. “You *did*,” she replies with a frown, “and I’m fine with that, really. Look,” she keeps going in a more rushed voice, not allowing me to jump in and trying to lock eyes with me again. “I’m genuinely sorry, once again, for disrespecting your privacy the other day, but I did promise—”

It makes the image of her hair spilled over my chest and her leg thrown over me flash through my mind, filling me with such burning hot rage that I barely stop myself from yelling.

I get in her face.“*My privacy*?” I echo with a bitter laugh. “It’s not even remotely possible to have anything like that with entire *fleets*,” I spit out, my face twisting in anger and my voice turning rushed and mocking, “of your family members constantly buzzing around, poking and prodding, whispering and throwing glances—”

Frowning, she takes a step back, folds her arms and cuts in, “You don’t have to have *anything* to do with my family.”

“Really?” I drawl, mirroring her by taking a step back and folding my arms. “So it didn’t just happen, your ex walking in on us?”

She flings her arms down to her sides in anger. “It was *you* who texted *me* —”

“No no,” I cut her off, starting to pace up and down, nodding vigorously, “this really *is my* fault. I should’ve listened to Ricky when he said you were too complicated for someone like me.”

I come to a stop, seeing her squinting at me. “I just didn’t see it at the time,” I say with poison in my voice, “what this thing between us *really* is.”

And I’m just waiting for her to bite.

So when she asks, teeth gritting and nostrils flaring, “And what is it that you think it is?”

I jump straight in, stalking a little closer, narrowing my eyes at her and saying in a bitter little whisper, “A princess’s temper tantrum.”

“*A princess’s temper tantrum?”* she echoes angrily, taking a step back. “You are *not* being fair.”

“*I’m* not being fair?” I snap back with a laugh, starting to pace again. “I wanted something fun and casual, and I thought I was getting something fun and casual. When, in fact, I was letting myself become a prop in a royal fucking will-they-won’t-they.”

I blow a breath through my nose and come to a stop, fixing my eyes on hers. “It’s just that we all know how it’s going to end.”

She marches up to me, balling her hands into fists, and spits out, “You’re talking as if I’m getting back with him. I’m *not*.”

I let out a frustrated laugh. “Oh you’re not?” I drawl. “So that was you saying no I just saw?” I ask as I motion at the entrance into the grove, where the two of them had their little chat.

And she opens her mouth to say something, but I’m fuming all of a sudden and I’m grabbing her by the wrist and getting in her face, forcing her to keep her eyes on me as I growl through gritted teeth, “Or was it you saying *absolutely fucking nothing*, just standing there, giving him exactly what he wants, preparing for a lifetime of that bullshit?”

She breaks her arm free, her frown disappearing as she retreats a little, *again*. She just looks at me for a second and says, in a softer voice that makes my muscles start relaxing a bit, “That’s *not* why I wasn’t saying anything. I’m never getting back with him. But there was so much going on in my head and I was so *angry* with him—”

That makes me fucking snap. I lunge at her and I jab a finger in the air in front of her face and I yell, at the top of my lungs, “Don’t you fucking talk to me about your feelings for your ex.”

For a second, there’s only silence.

And I see the flash of surprise in her eyes and the way she pulls away, tension in her muscles.

Quickly, I take a step back and I steady my breathing and I see her relax, but it’s over because I’ve let it through already, so the rest just comes pouring out.

“Drama,” I spit out, planting my feet firmly in the ground and watching her eyebrows pull down. “It’s all fucking drama. And it’s not really your

fault, I guess. It's who you are. You're *a lot,* and you're like that *all the fucking time*. It's exactly the kind of thing I try to avoid."

And I see this thing, *something*, flash through her face at those words, but I'm already letting out a bitter little scoff, waving my arms around and saying, "But hey, now I know better, right?"

And she just stands there, staring at me with this indecipherable look in her eyes. Nothing, she gives me *nothing*.

"And there's a silver lining in it for you, too," I say through gritted teeth, failing to resist the overwhelming urge to get a reaction. "At least you'll no longer have some *lowlife* in your life, *cupcake*."

Nothing. Just her breathing having become heavier.

It makes me fucking lose it. I march up to her, I get in her face and I snap, "I want you to lose my number, Romanov. I mean it. I don't *ever* want to talk to you again."

This time, I don't wait for a reaction. I turn on my heel and I start marching away, straight for the camp.

And it's so strange, this feeling that's flooding me. Like something at the same time breaking and swelling to enormous proportions, like a tsunami crashing to the ground inside me.

And by the time I'm jumping onto the plateau, my actual vision is blurring with rage, and of course it's then that I spot them, the little shits, sprawled on the chairs around one of the firepits, drinking champagne out of fancy glasses from their crappy makeshift bar.

Without giving it a second of thought, I inhale angrily and I walk up to them, their content chatter stopping as soon as their eyes land on me.

And they all throw me smiles, O'Malley saying, "Just in time, Boss. Fiona was about to—"

"Didn't I say," I start, slowly and in a low growl, making him immediately stop talking, "there'd be no more drinking during the day?"

Everyone's smiles slide off their faces.

And I turn to Gleason, who's standing next to the makeshift bar, and I pin him in place with my stare.

"You *did*, Boss," he mutters, moving to set his glass down.

"So what the fuck is *this*?" I demand in a low snarl, making him freeze as I tip my head at the bar. "Huh?"

And I let my eyes sweep over the rest of them, all motionless and watching my every move, and I bend and I lift the fucking bar off the

ground and I slam it back down, with such needless force, it breaks into a million pieces, the sounds of breaking getting switched out for total fucking silence.

I let the silence drag on for a moment, shooting the tongue-tied scaredy cats another warning look, before I push past them and head straight for my tent.

But it doesn't help. My anger doesn't die down, not even a little, so when I find myself alone, in front of the mirror above the sink, I'm still practically panting.

And there, in my reflection, in my eyes, I see my fox's. And they're burning hot, like I always imagined them.

But then, the light flickers and goes out, and for a second, it makes me feel a kind of dread I've never felt in my life.

Before it all gets swept under some rug and I'm exhaling, letting out a scoff and turning away from the mirror as this strange, feverish numbness starts flooding my entire being.

Chapter 29 - Nyx

I'm running, breathless and terrified, trees whizzing past me as I keep stumbling over corpses, men with blown skulls and horses with broken bodies. A battlefield, but I don't know when the battle happened, what it was all for, or whether I'm running towards salvation or damnation. It seems to go on for an eternity, until I find myself barging out of the woods and coming to a stop at the edge of a boundless clearing, everything turning peaceful in an instant. It takes me a second, but then I realize it's not grass I have before me, it's water, and there's this sound steadily drawing closer, making warmth spread through my chest and my heart throb in anticipation. Soft, playful whistling echoing off the lake. But it never does get closer and I turn around to see what's taking so long, but what I find when I do is a pair of eyes like two burning coals and there's a mouth with sharp teeth opening to swallow me and I'm stumbling back, falling into ice cold water as I hear a loud thud.

It makes me wake up, abruptly, a ball hitting my window from down below. I groan, peeling my cheek off the page of the book I fell asleep over. And I get up off my desk, every bone in my body aching, and there's this moment of intense thrill as I come to stand next to my window, thinking the ball was thrown for the specific purpose of getting me to look out.

But all I see are a dozen or so of Grimm shifters playing a game of Shifter Balls, the matches only getting more unruly the closer we get to the

close of the school year.

And right now, there's only two weeks to go until June 21st — the last day of school, the Fifth Game, the Grand Ball…

And my heart sinks low into my stomach and a knife twists in my gut, as soon as the last remnants of the dream dissipate and it all comes back to me, in a merciless flood of memories, like every fucking morning for the past two weeks — the night in my room, my visit to a certain tent, fucking F12, the fox coming at me, and worst of all, deleting a certain someone's number.

Swallowing the bitterness, I turn away from the window. And I don't just swat all the memories away. I *squish* them and I move to return to my book, the one I spent the whole night reading in the hopes of solving the puzzle of Brogan trying to use the Box and failing miserably.

But before I do, my eye gets drawn to my bed, on top of which I find two presents.

It makes me frown. It's *Nikolay's* birthday today, not mine, and these past two weeks, Max has been sending me one present a day, never more.

I walk up to the bed and I open the first one. An assortment of luxury bath salts with a note saying, "Anastasya, darling, my sincerest thanks for helping with Nikolay's birthday. Love, Mother."

For a second, it leaves me confused, that she'd do something as thoughtful as this. Then it hits me. She's only looking to get me in a good mood for tonight.

Because she's invited Max, of course.

And when I open the second present, there it is. The box of custom-made chocolates, this time all in the shape of cute little cupcakes, with the note saying, "Looking forward to seeing you tonight, cupcake. Love, Max."

I throw it on the pile with his other presents. Stuck in a haze, I haven't replied to any of his little notes so far. It's been two weeks since our last conversation, the one right after the Fourth Game. But instead of figuring out how I feel about it all, I've only gotten more confused.

As I keep looking at the presents, like a charm, the numbness starts to take over. Ever since it all happened, I haven't been able to find meaning in anything that mattered to me before, this hollowness following me wherever I go. And I've actually been welcoming it, the nothingness growing inside me, swallowing up the issues of the broken engagement, the family's status, the land…

So I tear my eyes away from the presents, I breathe a sigh of relief and I go to get under the shower, put on my training clothes and move on with my day.

*

Wearing tights and a training bra that can pass for a top, I rush down the stairs and into the Common Room, where both Nikolay and Hilde are having their morning coffee in our spot.

I take a deep breath and I walk up to them, rummaging through my bag to get the present.

“Morning, Nyx,” Hilde greets me with the now habitual excessively warm tone loaded with unspoken questions.

As usual, I ignore it. “Morning, Hilde,” I say, joylessly but politely, as I hold the present out to my brother. “Happy birthday, Nick,” I breathe out, going soft at the last second and choosing the nickname instead of the full name.

It *is* his special day after all.

And I see him hesitate for a second, but we *are* moving away from not speaking with each other at all. So he takes the present in his hand and says, “Thank you, Anastasya.”

And he does make a point of using my full name and being a little cold, but then a little smile tugs at his lips, and just as I lower myself into my armchair, he gives the present back and adds, a little less coldly this time, “I’ll be taking my presents in the evening.” He clears his throat, a flash of excitement flicking through his eyes. “I want them all in one giant pile, you know?”

“Of course,” I say, feeling Hilde’s eyes on me and having to fight the urge to shoot her a nasty look.

But it’s then that I notice my brother’s in his regular clothes. “I thought I’d find you in a suit?” I ask, frowning a little.

That seems to confuse him. He cranes his neck to look out the window, saying, “Isn’t it early fucking morning?”

“Of course it is, silly,” I hear Hilde say.

“The meeting, Nikolay,” I remind him, without looking at Hilde, my voice a little harsher than I’d like it. “About the land.”

I guess there’s still a part of me that cares.

“Ah,” he says as he turns to throw me a little squint. And we’re back to being cold. “Got pushed a little,” he explains as he starts to avoid my eye.

“No big deal. We’re a quick signature away.”

And he rubs his temples a little, the way he’s been doing ever since he got attacked by the Archon, despite no actual damage having been done.

But it works. Makes me feel bad. And I *have* decided to finally let the family take care of the whole thing anyway, so I say, “Great,” a little more warmly. “Sounds great.”

“Great,” he echoes as he turns his eyes back onto me, his gaze lingering and searching for a second before it softens.

“I just have to say I’m so happy for you all,” Hilde says and I turn to look at her, trying my hardest not to straight out ignore her despite her entire fucking being having become so grating to me, it’s one of the few things that can snap me out of my numbness.

“Thanks, Hilde,” I force myself to say.

“Hey, sis,” Nikolay starts, surprising me with the pet name.

I nudge him to talk.

“You going to Byrne’s class later?”

I nod.

“Would you mind submitting my paper for me? I’ll send it to you to print out.”

For a second, I hesitate. Then I bite my tongue and I nod. “Sure.” And I move to get up. “I’ll see you two later then.”

It’s Hilde’s hand on my forearm that stops me. “You’re not going to the cafeteria with us?”

I slink away from her touch, grabbing my bag off the floor and slinging it over my shoulder. “We have the finals just around the corner,” I say, simply.

“Bloody hell, sis,” Nikolay says with a rough little laugh. “Where would *I* be if I studied as hard as you?”

I don’t say anything. I just throw them both a half-smile and I walk away.

But she doesn’t let me get far. It’s just as I reach the staircase that I hear her call out, “Nyx.”

I stop midstep, I take a deep breath and I turn to face her just as she comes to a stop in front of me.

Then she just stands there, looking at me like I’m some circus freak. “Yes, Hilde?” I ask, fighting not to grit my teeth.

“You’ve barely talked to us for the past, like, two f-ing weeks,” she finally says. “Are you mad at me? Or Nikolay? Or both of us?”

I press my lips tight before I choose to say, “No. I’m just ready for the summer break to start.”

To my surprise, that makes a spark appear in her eyes. “Tell me about it,” she says with a breathy laugh. “We’ve only got two weeks left and Professor Byrne’s drowning us in homework as if we had months. But I *am* looking forward to the last game, I have to say. I mean, only six players left and a lot of people betting on *you*… You must be thrilled as well.”

For a second, I just look at her in silence, watching the frown reappear on her face. Then I just say, “Yeah.” And I turn on my heel and I start rushing down the stairs.

And I’m not going to the Library to prepare for the finals, as I implied. Sure, I had a hard time my first year here, having just been shaken out of years of depression. But ever since, this school’s been a fucking joke.

So today, I think as I barge out of Lilith Tower and onto the hot summer day outside, I’ll first be blowing off some steam at the training ground and then going to Vasilisa, to keep preparing for the only thing in my life right now that’s *not* a complete fucking joke.

The fast approaching Fifth Game and the potential fucking chaos it might wreak.

*

By the time I get to Vasilisa’s room, I’m in a different mood. I still have sweat clinging to my skin from all the training I did, of which I’ve been doing a lot more than usual, but there’s this lightness in my muscles and clearness in my head that almost make me believe that one day, I’ll stop feeling the way I’m feeling right now.

Still, I choose to take a minute after I close the door and before I call for her. I sit on the floor, my spine perfectly straight and my eyes fixed ahead, and I try to just be for a minute.

Right now, Vasilisa’s room is the only one I can feel really comfortable in. Where I’m not constantly watched or asked stupid questions or reminded of things *I just want to forget*. And that’s exactly why I have my lunch here with me, waiting for me in my bag, and why I’ve set up an extra altar for myself under her portrait, and why I’ve been coming here, every day, for the past two weeks.

And it’s starting to have that effect on me right now, easing the tension, deepening my breathing, clearing my thoughts.

So, right now, this is the situation, I start, my eyebrows pulling down in focus.

The Archon has been in custody ever since it happened.

No one knows exactly where and no one knows in what conditions.

But the real head-scratcher is that no one knows why exactly. Sure, she used her connection to the Box to stop the Game and then try to do something with it. But, I mean…

What was the plan?

There was nothing about the way she did it that indicated any kind of strategy.

To top it all off, while they're still keeping the previous Archon imprisoned, the Academy is appointing the mediocre Professor Byrne as the new one and making it seem that the Fifth Game, the very last one, will still be held on June 21st, as planned.

I let out a scoff, my eyes darting to the portrait. And she, I think as I fix them on Vasilisa, the goddamn great-great-grandmother who's supposed to serve as some kind of mentor here, what does *she* have to say about it?

She's no idea what's going on, but I should be really careful.

Yeah, right, I think as images flash through my mind — of those Fiains screaming as the balls were exploring in their faces, of Ricky all bloodied in that dungeon, of the terrified look in Nikolay's eyes after the last Game, of the fox…

Which, of course, makes the words all come back.

"You're *a lot,* and you're like that *all the fucking time*."

They always take my breath away, threatening to drag me to some even darker place.

And that's exactly why I don't let them live inside my head.

Gritting my teeth, I decide to shrug it off and focus on the only thing I *can* do right now.

Practice Blood Magic with her.

I stand up. "Vasilisa," I call out.

And she jumps out of the painting, as usual landing without making a sound and throwing me a little smirk. "Any news?" she asks as she gets into position, coming to stand right opposite me.

"No," I say as I take the knife out of my holster, soften my knees, swing my torso a little to the side and get my hand into the position to throw.

“Pity,” she replies. Folding her arms, she looks at my knife and orders, lazily yet in a tone that downright compels, making me picture her in a battle with countless soldiers charging at her command, “Left eye.”

I fling the knife straight through her left eye and use my Blood Magic to get it back.

“Right knee.”

I hit her right knee.

“Heart.”

I stab her straight through the heart.

She nods and says, “Good, now the marbles.”

I get the crystallized blood marbles out of my bag and I lay them on the floor in front of me.

Standing straighter, but looking down at them, I take a deep breath and I close my eyes, trying to make my nose fix on the scent and my mind make the connection.

And I can feel it when I manage to make one of them lift off the ground and up into the air, and, as usual, it gives me this thrill I can’t quite describe. Like, all my life I’ve been traveling down one and the same stream and now I’m in a completely different one, the sensation at the same time familiar and strange.

But then, then it births this sudden aggressiveness that always makes my eyebrows pull down and my control start slipping away.

And if I had it my way, I’d take a lot more time with it, but I can already hear the insanely easily bored old witch huffing and puffing.

“Fine, I’m ready,” I snap, feeling my cheeks burn in anger.

“Forehead,” she orders.

And I fling my eyes open and I focus them on her forehead, but the marble just goes through her chest and falls on the floor, making a strangely musical sound while rolling away.

I grit my teeth, feeling all the suppressed emotions starting to surface.

Vasilisa just rolls her eyes at me. “You know what ‘forehead’ means, girl?”

For a second, I just throw daggers at her. It makes me want to snap her fucking neck. Without thinking, I grab my lunchbox off the floor and I fling it at her, letting out a frustrated groan as it whizzes right through her, comes crashing into the wall behind her and spills its guts, that is, my food, all over the floor.

Panting, I turn my eyes back to Vasilisa, expecting to see an angry face.

I find her stalking towards me with amusement on her face. “Oh I like that,” she drawls in this mocking little voice. And she comes to lean in and whisper with this devious little look on her face, “Do it again, just *harder*.”

“You fucking animal,” I snap at her at the same moment she starts laughing like crazy, as if my face is so terribly amusing right now.

“For fuck’s sake,” I yell, slamming my fists into my head and starting to let all the pent-up anger come crashing through the gates. “Everything’s a joke to you, isn’t it?” I demand as I swing my arms back down and throw her a nasty stare.

I see her quickly turn serious. “And you know what your problem with Blood Magic is, girl?”

“*What*,” I hiss as I use my mind to get the marbles off the floor, fling them into the air and make them burst into a million fucking pieces, seeing Vasilisa’s eyebrows shoot up before having to shield my eyes from the tiny shards.

But once it’s safe, I just lunge at her, and I make her take a step back even though she doesn’t have to because she’s some kind of fucking ghost, and I say through gritted teeth, “My problem? I *dare* you to tell me what it is.”

For a second, she just squints at me. “Too many scruples and not enough anger,” she says flatly. Then she throws me a weird little smile and says, a mix of amusement and pride in her voice, “But I see you’re working on that.”

“Well,” I blurt out, starting to feel my anger dying down and my breathing getting back to normal, “sorry.”

And she lets out a little scoff, making it clear that I’ve just *un*earned myself that little look of pride.

But I don’t linger on it, because my eyes dart straight to my lunch lying on the floor. And I let out a dragged out moan and I shake my head, saying, “I can’t fucking believe you. Now, if I want to eat, I have to go to the fucking cafeteria.”

And I turn to throw her a nasty look. “Where there’s *people*.”

*

I breathe a sigh of relief when I walk through the archway and see that the cafeteria is only moderately crowded, most students having their lunch out in the gardens.

But when I take my seat and start digging in, I soon realize I've found myself a listener in a private conversation between a buff fae guy and a gorgeous shifter girl at the table next to me.

"Just one more date, that's all I ask," I hear as I stab a couple of fries with my fork.

"I'm being serious, James. I just don't think I'm in the right headspace."

"And yesterday you were?"

And I try not to listen, but they're being too loud for their own good. So I start thinking about switching seats, glancing around to see that there are quite a few empty tables.

"Well, things change," I hear her tell him. "I have a busy life. No time for fooling around right now."

Letting out a sigh, I move to start packing up, but then I hear them start getting up and I breathe a sigh of relief, slumping back into my chair.

"You won't even eat with me?" he asks as they both come into my line of sight, the serving counter with the queue of incoming students right behind them.

"No," the girl tells him as she raises a palm between the two of them. "Just… don't."

And she goes to stand in line, alone, while the guy goes back to the table, seemingly seething.

I tear my eyes away, making myself focus on eating so I can get the hell out of here as quickly as possible. It's not without reason that I've been spending these first summer days locked up in a dark tower with Vasilisa.

I can't stand being around people right now, listening to them talk about the finals, the food, the sports, the clothes, the concerts and all the other shit that doesn't sound utterly pointless and grating if and *only* if you're not on the very brink of unraveling.

So when I hear the already familiar banter, laughter and confident footsteps coming from the Entrance Hall, signaling the arrival of the Pack…

I instantly freeze, my heart throbbing like it's trying to get out of my chest and fly away.

Please, I think as I grip my fork and close my eyes shut for a moment, please don't let him be among them. I've managed to avoid him so far, just two more weeks and that's it. Please, I almost start muttering to myself.

But when I open my eyes, who do I see but him, sauntering into the cafeteria at the head of a dozen boys and girls from his pack, all looking as if they're having the time of their life.

And I rush to lower my eyes, but I still catch his for a second, and there's a flash of a frown on his face before he looks away as if he hasn't even seen me, going straight for the queue for the serving counters.

And at the very same time, I breathe a sigh of relief and feel myself start simmering. So I focus on steadying my breathing and trying to decide whether I should just leave the rest of the food or maybe try to quickly pack it up to go somehow, my stomach grumbling.

But before my stupid mind manages to make a decision, I hear a low wolf whistle, the sound of which has been burned into my very brain, and my eyes snap up and I see him standing right behind that beautiful shifter girl, eyeing her up and down as she keeps moving in the queue, glancing over her shoulder at him as if she's not exactly minding the attention.

And I'm gripping my fork so tight, my knuckles must be white as bone, but I can't make myself look away. And I can't stop myself from using my hearing to eavesdrop.

Because now, the rest of his pack starting to chat amongst themselves, he seems to be rushing to grab everything she reaches for before she can get it for herself, making her start shaking her head at him with a flush and an incredulous smile.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demands, playfully, when he does it for the fourth time.

He throws her a look of feigned surprise, pushing his chest out a little. "Getting your attention," he replies matter-of-factly. "What else?" And he throws her one of those disarming grins of his, followed by a lazy, sexy little wink.

And she gives in, like, completely. She leans in to whisper, a flirty smile on her lips, "Well, then I guess you owe me lunch, don't you?"

His mouth cracks into a grin and he looks over his shoulder and at his pack, saying, "Guess you're on your own, boys and girls."

And he grabs both of their trays, throws the girl another smile and starts leading her to one of the empty tables, making me quickly lower my eyes, feeling as if I'm about to jump out of my fucking skin.

But then there's that guy, the one the girl blew off, coming into my line of sight and making me look back up because he seems to be headed straight

towards them.

And it makes me fail to resist the urge to use my hearing when I see him come to block Howe's way. The girl stops as well, throwing him a pissed-off look.

"You know," the guy says in a threatening, but relatively low voice, "you should stick to your own."

Here we go again, I think with an internal sigh. Now, right after he's won over the girl, that fucking Howe will win over her little boy toy as well, making me doubly pissed-off.

But then, instead of that mouth cracking into a friendly grin, I see his lips tug into a nasty little smile as he holds the trays out to his right, one of his pack immediately appearing to take them.

I frown as I watch him slide his hands into his pockets and take a step closer, making the guy double back.

"What did you just say to me?" he asks in a steady voice that booms over the cafeteria, making the chatter die down and heads snap in their direction.

The guy glances around nervously, now forced to raise his voice as well. "I said, you have plenty of your own," he drawls. "So leave Grimm girls alone."

Howe lets out a snicker. "And if I don't? *Please…"* And he leans a little closer to give the guy another nasty smile. "Tell me."

Taking a deep, angry breath, the guy retreats a step, taps his Runes and then flicks two fingers of his right hand upwards. I see a stone piece the size of a football get loose from the floor and fly up.

As I watch it hover, I struggle to understand why Howe's just standing there. But it only does so for a second before it slams straight into his chest, making him stumble back and producing this sound that makes me wince.

The stone falls to the ground and for a second, there's only silence, and I'm holding my breath, watching Howe grimacing, with his eyes shut, in what must be excruciating pain.

Then he opens his eyes, puts that nasty smile back on his face and picks the stone up off the ground, as if nothing happened. And he starts turning it in his hands, as if he's having fun with it, until he stops, abruptly, looks the guy straight in the eye, lets go of the stone and then slams the palms of his hands into its sides, his tattoos emitting this faint glow and the stone producing this sound like a mini explosion as it crumbles to the ground.

He just crushes the goddamn stone.

And then he walks up to the guy, who's obviously in shock, and leans to tell him, making sure everyone can hear him, "Here's a shocking revelation."

He takes the guy by the collar of his shirt, lifts him off the ground and slams him into the column to his right.

"Who should leave Grimm girls alone," he hums, but the sound is menacing, "that's entirely up to, well, *Grimm girls*, now isn't it?"

And then he lets the guy drop to the ground, turning back to his pack.

"Why didn't you fucking do anything?" I hear the guy ask, and I turn to see him getting up, shooting this blond fae guy in the audience a nasty look.

"You started it, man," the fae answers, referring to our policy of letting people who start fights *finish* their fights as well.

"That doesn't apply to foreign trash," the guy snaps back.

But that makes Howe appear back in front of him. "Foreign trash?" he drawls mockingly. "Well now you're hurting my feelings."

Fuck, I think to myself even before he motions to his pack and like a trained army, they almost instantly surround the guy, grab him by all his limbs and pin him to the ground with his legs spread apart.

Slowly, Howe comes to tower over him, his hands in his pockets, tilting his head as if he's only mildly amused.

"Please don't," I hear the guy whimper.

"Shh," Howe starts, the tip of his left boot coming to press on the guy's crotch. "It's rocks you play with, right?" He pauses for a second before he says in a near whisper. "Just picture yourself being one."

And it's at that moment that I just can't take it anymore. I get up, my chair scraping against the floor, and I hear Howe blow a laugh through his nose, telling the guy, "Go on, you're no fun at all."

But I'm already running out of the cafeteria, my mind buzzing as this bitterness starts flooding my mouth.

*

It's with unseeing eyes that I keep sitting there, watching my brother open his presents in the Grand Hall of our Summer Palace, surrounded by a hundred or so blood relatives, friends and sycophants. And all the polished candlesticks have been lit and all the marble columns decorated with wreaths and all the tables set with the finest foods and drinks you can come by in our lands.

But I'm sticking to the outermost table, away from the crowd, the one with the view through the French doors and into the garden, only sipping on my champagne and not even touching the food.

Despite my decision to simply not think about these things anymore, my mind keeps going back to the incident in the cafeteria today, trying to explain this sudden change in a certain someone's personality. From calm to aggressive, from friendly to vindictive.

Or maybe it's not a change at all. Maybe I just haven't seen him in situations like these before.

But whatever the explanation and no matter how hard it is to swallow, maybe they were right. Maybe *Max* was right. He's not someone I should ever have been more than polite with.

"Bloody hell," Nikolay yells, making me feel grateful for this interruption in my train of thoughts as my eyes snap back to him holding something small in his hands. "Thanks, Lord Pfenning."

I frown, the sight of the old lord making me think of all the spats I've been forced to witness throughout the course of my life — about titles, investments, lands…

And it makes me start contemplating Vasilisa and her methods again. Once upon a time, I think to myself, all the distinguished families gathered here were ordinary families. Until they decided to become more than that. And now they wield such tremendous power only to waste it on bickering over the most inconsequential things.

But if you took them out of the equation… Or if you took *yourself* out of the equation, I think to myself as entire worlds start exploding in my mind, different than anything I've ever known. It would mean such freedom to start from scratch, it's hard to even contemplate.

And it's not like things like that haven't been done before.

It's at that moment that I see Aunt Frieda separate from the crowd and come over to my table, snapping me out of it. I glance at the petit fours on the three-tiered silver cake stand in front of me and I know exactly what she's coming for and I know exactly what she'll say.

"Aren't these petit flowers to die for, dear?" she says as she comes to stand in front of me, lifting a piece with two shriveled yet delicate fingers.

Petit fours, I think to myself. *Fours*, not flowers. "You couldn't have said it better, Aunt Frieda," I tell her, having long ago given up on the quest of teaching her what the word really is.

And I throw her a smile and she throws one back, but all of a sudden, I feel so desolate, thinking this is how I'll spend the next Lilith knows how many years of my life, knowing exactly what Aunt Frieda will say and about what.

And just as she turns to walk back into the crowd, I see Max doing the opposite.

It makes me frown when I see he's headed straight towards me, despite having been expecting him to come talk to me the entire evening.

"Hello, cupcake," he greets with a smile as he comes to stand before me, clad in an impeccable white suit.

"Hi, Max," I say, trying not to sound too cold. After all, he's been nothing but nice to me.

"Isn't it a lovely evening?"

"It is."

"Would you do me the honor of taking a walk with me?"

For a second, I just look at him, still feeling like I just don't have it in me, to talk to *anyone*, let alone him. I seem to no longer know who I am, what I want, what's wrong with me… What could I tell him?

But it's so soft and warm, the look he's throwing me, and I find myself unable to refuse. "Sure," I say as I get up.

And we walk through the French door and into the garden, the night air fragrant and the towering cypresses barely visible against the rich midnight-blue sky.

We start down the gravel path leading through two rows of blooming hyacinths and straight for the fountain.

For a couple of minutes, we just keep walking in silence, his elbow grazing mine every once in a while, making me remember other little walks like this. Walks we used to take when we first started dating. And it makes me long for that simplicity — the touch, the silence, the night sky above us.

Then he stops, snaps a flower off a hyacinth bush and holds it out for me with a smile. "A flower for the lady."

And I've no idea why, but it makes me cringe, what he says and the way he says it, snapping me out of longing for the old days.

I take the flower and I keep walking, scrambling to find something to grab on to as he falls into step with me. And of course, it being top of mind, what I find is the topic of the mysterious Archon and the even more

mysterious events of the Fourth Game, of which the Academy doesn't seem to want to breathe a word.

"What was it that the Pied Piper tasked you with that day?" I ask.

He glances at me.

"Oh, that's both inconsequential and long forgotten," he replies matter-of-factly, making me have to stop myself from letting out a frustrated sigh.

And we keep walking, and the closer we draw to the fountain, the more the sound of water ripples through the balmy night air, creating a soothing, magical atmosphere. But the more I'm aware of it, the more I feel this painful longing, the more painful for being futile.

Then, just as we get to the fountain, Max stops and turns to face me, making me stop as well. "Now, cupcake, I want to be honest with you," he says, sweetly, as he catches my eye. "I'm not here to celebrate your brother's birthday."

"Really?"

"No need to be snarky, Anastasya," he snaps a little, but quickly collects himself. "I'm trying to apologize."

It's enough to make me feel bad. "Go ahead then."

He clears his throat. "When you broke off our engagement," he starts, his voice growing soft again, but apologetic as well, "I won't lie, I spent a few months wanting to hurt you for what you did."

It renders me speechless, what he says. It's not what I'd expect.

He just looks at me for a second, warmly. "Then I realized… The only reason I felt that way was my love for you." He presses his lips tight. "And, well, it was the incident before the Fourth Game that helped open my eyes."

And all of a sudden, there's this flood of images pouring into my brain, those I keep shut out at all costs, of a certain someone's back as he refuses to let me close the distance, of the pissed-off look on his face as he tells me what he really thinks of me. But what hurts the most is the image of him looking at me with a smile on his face.

I make myself snap out of it and turn my focus back onto Max, but when I finally speak, the words are rushed and breathless. "Get to the point, please."

"The point is," he starts, gently, "someone else would've crossed you off that same second."

I have to fight the urge to shake my head in an attempt not to let the words cause another flood of images.

“The majority would,” he keeps going, more fervently by the second. And now he’s taking my hand in his, trying to catch my eye again as I struggle to keep my focus on him. “But *I* didn’t. I think I’ve shown I’m a good man, Anastasya, a good man who loves you from the bottom of his heart, despite everything.”

I lock eyes with him, my eyebrows pulling down. Because, all of a sudden, I’m realizing where this little speech is headed.

“Look, Max,” I force myself to start, wanting to beat him to it, “you really have only been good to me, but I—”

“Exactly,” he cuts in with determination in his voice. “I’ve only been good to you, and it’s obvious, cupcake, that you’re not well.”

The remark makes blood rush to my face, but it’s warm, the way he says it, and I don’t think I have any right to hold it against him, at least not after everything that’s happened.

So I just shake my head. “Please, let’s not get into it.”

“We don’t have to,” he urges, tightening his grip on my wrist. “Whatever you’re going through, it’ll pass,” he says.

And it’s in a near whisper that he does, but with such determination in his voice that I find myself staring into his eyes, burning with the need for it to be true, what he’s telling me.

And I don’t say anything, but that only makes him more determined. “You’ll get well again, and I’ll do whatever it is in my power to help you. You only need to say yes, what you already did before all this happened. Didn’t you?”

I keep looking into his eyes, feeling a sob coming on and fighting it off before I say, “I did.”

“Before you broke it off,” he continues, frowning a little, “just like that, for no reason whatsoever. And how was it without me? Did you have fun, Anastasya?”

For a second, I stay silent, my eyes welling with tears and all my desperation threatening to rise from the depths to which I’ve pushed it.

“We’d be in it together, Max?” I ask in a fervent, choked-up voice. “You’d give me the respect that I deserve? You’d treat me as your partner?”

“Absolutely,” he replies with a determined nod. “We’d be equals, we’d rule side by side, and the money I’d spend on the land, we’d just use it to make your vision of it come true.”

And he gives me a smile and now I have to really struggle not to start crying, my heart swelling in my chest.

There's a second of silence before he urges, "Come on, just say yes."

First, my own words flash through my mind. The words I said to a certain someone. *I'm never getting back with him.*

But I keep looking into his eyes, the past year flashing through my mind, mistake after mistake after mistake made by a girl so lost, she didn't even know it. Max, *my* Max. Why did I ever think there'd be anyone better for me than my Max? I don't even care about the sex anymore. As if *that's* something you build your future around.

And if he doesn't hate me, even after all I've done… "You really still love me?" I ask in a shaky whisper.

"I do. So much."

"And we really can forget…" I shake my head, not wanting to keep going.

"*Everything*," he finishes my sentence with such determination in his voice. "Forget everything and just move on."

I hesitate before I ask, this tightness in my throat making me sound breathless, "And you don't think I'm too much? You don't think I'm a lot?"

He frowns at me, making my heart sink. "Of course not," he says matter-of-factly. "Why would you even ask that?"

It makes relief flood my body, his reaction. Maybe, for everything to be okay again, I really only have to come back to him.

And I let out a pent-up breath and I pull my hand out of his grip only to throw myself into his arms, squeezing my eyes shut to stop tears from falling down my cheeks.

He laughs and squeezes me tight.

He's right, my Max. He was right all along. And soon, I think to myself, in a little more than two weeks, I'll stop feeling everything I'm feeling right now — all this anxiousness and sadness and desperation — and I'll be able to start looking forward to our future together.

Everything will be exactly the way it was *supposed* to be in the first place.

It's then that it pops into my head, making my muscles stiffen and my stomach twist.

"I only have one condition," I tell him as I pull away a little.

"Anything."

“Let’s not tell people until after the school year is over.”

He raises his eyebrows at me.

“Not the family,” I explain, albeit hesitantly. “The family can know. Just not… people at the Academy.”

At that, raised eyebrows turn into a frown, so I rush to say, “I don’t want the pomp, Max. I’m tired and I just want the Games and the school year to be over.”

For a second, he just looks at me. Then he throws me a warm smile and says, “Sure. You got it, cupcake.”

I smile back, for the first time in forever, and I pull away to hold my hand out for him.

He slides the ring around my finger and then tries to pull me in for a kiss, my palms snapping up to stop him.

I shake my head, averting my eyes a little. “Not just yet. I’m not ready for that yet.”

And I can see something flash through his eyes and I can tell he’s not happy, but then he just gives me a nod and a smile.

It makes me feel good, so when he moves to wrap his arm around my waist, I let him.

Then he turns me around, saying in a raised voice, “Yes. She said yes.”

And it’s only then, when the clapping and the cheering start, that I realize we have the entire household watching from the West Wing stairs.

No, I groan to myself.

“Congrats, Max,” Nikolay practically yells as he rushes down to shake my fiance’s hand. “I won’t even mind that you went and did this on my birthday.” He lets out a rough, jolly laugh. “Bloody hell, I’m happy for you.”

And he turns to me and I smile, letting him pull me into a big old hug.

Then I let my fiance start leading me to the others, the smiles I can see on all their faces, including Mother’s, making me start relaxing, thinking I must have made the right choice.

There’s only the matter of not letting people find out until the school year is over. Luckily, I can make it so I practically don’t see anyone for the following two weeks, my first major concern being the party that the Grimms are throwing before the Fifth Game.

*

Anxious, that's what I am. We have the Game tomorrow, and the last day of school, and the Grand Ball. But as I go down the stairs and into the Common Room, where Max is already waiting for me, there's something else I'm worried about. It makes me wish I could do this with invisibility magic on me.

Sadly, I realize as soon as I spot Max looking up at me from the bottom of the stairs, it seems that people can still see me.

"Don't you look wonderful, cupcake?" he says as he holds his hand out for me.

It makes me frown, realizing I'd half expected him to throw some snarky comment at my choice of outfit — simple black dress, combat boots and red lipstick. "Thank you," I tell him, with a genuine smile, as I take his hand.

"And I hear you've aced all your finals," he says as he leads me across the nearly empty Common Room. "Such a clever girl you are."

That makes me blow a laugh through my nose. "When have you become such a flatterer?" I ask, and just before we reach the staircase, I make him stop and I give him a kiss on the mouth, the first one since we got engaged again.

The kiss is nice, like cuddling up with a book you know you'll like because you've read it before.

It's with his eyebrows raised and lips curling into a smile that he looks at me when I pull away. "What did I do to deserve *that*?"

I just give him a smile, loop my arm through his and move to keep walking, going down the stairs and to the Elevator on the Tower Ground Floor.

But as soon as we reach it, I see someone waiting there, a grim-looking male shifter. My eyebrows pull down when I see him throw Max this funny little look.

Max stops and turns to face me. "Would you mind? It won't take long."

"Do what you have to," I say with a smile, my mind lingering on the fact I've seen the shifter somewhere before.

And I go to wait in front of the Elevator as the two of them come to stand near the window on the opposite side of the room.

I whip out my phone, but before I can actually busy myself with it, it finally hits me where I've seen the guy. He's the Pied Piper's 'assistant', one of those that never has to do any admin, let's just say.

And I don't look up from my phone, but before I can stop myself, I'm already using my hearing to eavesdrop.

"Still no luck," the shifter says in a low, serious voice, "but the Pied Piper's changed her mind. We'll still have the Game tomorrow."

"Are you fucking with me?" Max demands, also keeping his voice down. "Why aren't you back there, trying to get more information out of her?"

The Archon, he must be referring to the Archon.

"She's a tough nut to crack," the shifter says, "and there's only so much the Pied Piper will let me do."

"I can't fucking believe it," Max snaps. "As if the Games aren't dangerous enough even with all the figurines working properly."

The shifter says nothing.

There's a second of silence before Max asks, "What about the other two?"

"They've run all the tests," the shifter starts reciting in a flat voice. "Door seems to be exhibiting strange behavior, but Hourglass is perfectly stable. And that's all that matters, for tomorrow at least."

Judge, I think to myself, shivers running down my spine. She tried to use Judge, *that's* what she did.

"Okay," I hear Max say. "Thanks. Give the Pied Piper my regards."

And just like that, he's standing next to me, making me look up as he calls for the Elevator. "Thank you for waiting, cupcake. Shall we?" he asks when the door opens.

I walk inside, hesitating a little. But just as the door closes, I bite the bullet. "Anything worth relaying?"

"Ah," he says with a wave of his hand, "tiresome admin stuff. Would bore you out of your mind."

I don't say anything. He's lying, I think to myself. But then again, I don't have all the information. For all I know, the Pied Piper could've sworn him to secrecy.

So I choose to just give him a smile.

And the door opens again, letting us into the nearly empty Entrance Hall, the music blaring from the Main Hall, where the party is.

And my mind is buzzing with what I've heard just now and I'm so anxious about tonight, but I still breathe a sigh of relief when we walk through the archway, his arm around my waist, and I see exactly how crowded the place is.

It'll be easy to avoid seeing people I don't want to see here.

"Max, you won't believe what I managed to score," my brother yells as soon as he spots us approaching his and Hilde's table.

He's holding a bottle of bright green liquid up for us to see. Feno wine. It makes me frown, but before I can say anything, Hilde cuts in.

"Nyx," she urges as she looks up at me. "Please tell him he can't have any."

"Why don't you just drive a stake right through my heart, woman?" Nikolay demands with hurt and defiance in his voice.

"Oh please," Max scoffs as he pulls the chair out for me. I throw him a smile and take a seat. "Feno," he continues as he takes his seat next to me, "you're fretting about Feno?"

And he turns to me, saying in an important little voice, "I'd had worse by the time Father gave me my first horse."

I don't smile, his voice and the words having put me off a little.

"But if he drinks too much," Hilde insists, "he'll poison his blood."

It *is* true. And it makes images of bloodied bandages and syringes flood my mind.

"Then I just won't drink too much, will I?" Nikolay says, as if to a half-wit. "Tell her she's being an ass, Nyx. I think I deserve some unwinding after everything I've been through lately."

I have to fight not to roll my eyes at this statement. And there's this resistance in me to doing anything but letting brother darling do whatever the fuck he wants, be it having fun at a party or killing himself in the stupidest possible way.

But when I look into his eyes, it makes me let out an internal sigh, hold my hand out and say, "Can I take a look?"

He gives it to me.

And for a moment, I pretend I'm reading the label. Then I hold it out a little to the side and intentionally drop the thing, making it come crashing to the floor, all the liquid spilling onto the polished tiles beneath our feet.

"Shit," I curse, faking surprise and remorse as I look up to see everyone staring at the mess. "I'm so sorry."

"Come on, Nyx," my brother drawls as he turns to frown at me. "You expect us to believe you're good with a knife and you can't even hold onto a bottle?"

I just shrug and proceed to pouring myself a drink, letting the conversation at the table happen without me.

And with every passing minute, my anxiousness dies down a little, birthing a possibility I haven't even entertained yet.

That I won't have to try to avoid seeing people I don't want to see, because people I don't want to see won't even be coming to the party.

But almost as soon as I think that, I spot that fucking Howe enter the Main Hall with his pack and all the anxiousness comes flooding back into my body.

*

I sense Max looking and I force myself to tear my eyes away from Howe, who didn't seem to notice me, him and his pack already merging with the crowd. But when I turn them to my fiance, I see him glance in the same direction I did.

Then he locks eyes with me, staying silent while throwing me this funny little squint that makes a pang of guilt shoot through me.

I don't hesitate. "What would you say," I ask as I lean in, determination in my voice, "if we left this place, *right now*, and went up to my room to order some food from the kitchens and just relax, like we used to?"

For a second, he just looks deeper into my eyes. Then he shakes his head, gives me a funny little smile and starts getting up. "No no, the party's only getting started."

It makes me frown, when I see him move for the center of the room with determination in his step.

To my surprise, he jumps onto one of the tables, his eyes sweeping the room. "Excuse me," his voice booms, "may I have everyone's attention, please."

Blood rushes to my cheeks when the music dies down and all the eyes in the room snap to my fiance standing on the table with a mysterious smile on his lips.

No…

"Now, as you all know," he starts, "at the start of this year, I got engaged only to have that engagement broken off not four months later."

There's a murmur of sympathy from the crowd, but I'm focusing all my attention on not jumping out of my skin.

"We won't be getting into detail about how it all went down," my fiance continues with a laugh and a wave of his hand, "but I did go from a happy

man to a wretched one in the blink of an eye."

There's a split second of silence during which it finally hits me, that he's actually going to do this.

"But I'm pleased to say," he says in a voice that seems to match the sentiment, "that as of two weeks ago, I've gone back to being the luckiest man alive."

He turns to me, holding his hand out in my direction. "And this is the woman I have to thank for that. Why don't you come on up, Anastasya?"

For a second, I find myself struggling to catch my breath.

But there are so many eyes on me now, and I just get up and I walk up to the table on which he's standing, my mind buzzing and blank all at once.

Max jumps down and takes my hand in his.

"No," I mutter to him, but before I can do anything, he lifts my limp hand in the air to show the ring on my finger.

And the crowd cheers, but all I can do is say one weak, "Thank you," trying my hardest not to actually look at anyone, so I don't see who's watching and who's not.

"Let's just say," I hear my fiance continue as he lowers my hand but keeps it in his, "sometimes, the bumpier the start, the smoother the ride. Isn't that right, cupcake?"

I hear laughter and I turn to look at him and he's throwing me a smile, but all I can do is give him one stiff nod, my ears ringing.

"And because we're so thrilled about this," he says as he turns away from me again, motioning to someone in the crowd, "we felt the need to share the happiness with all of you tonight."

The next thing I know, the crowd is parting to let through a whole procession of staff members pushing carts stacked with fondue, cakes, drinks, the works.

"This is all courtesy of the Aalders and Romanov families. Enjoy," Max says, making the crowd break out into cheerful clapping and whistling.

It makes me finally start catching my breath, when he starts leading me away, pausing every two seconds to let people congratulate us.

"Didn't we say we'd wait until after the school year was over?" I lean in to whisper, in a tense little voice, as soon as I get the chance.

"Well, it *is* over," he snaps a little, throwing me another funny little look just as we get back to our table. "Isn't it?" he asks as he takes his seat.

For a second, I struggle trying to recall our agreement. “It is,” I finally say, frowning as I slump into my chair, desperate for my mind to stop buzzing.

And it does, only to go completely fucking blank when I see who’s walking straight towards us.

Howe, one hand in his pocket, one on a gorgeous fae girl’s waist.

And it’s not me he comes to talk to. He doesn’t even look at me.

Instead, he comes to stand in front of my fiance and, to my surprise, throws him a wide, slightly menacing grin as he leans in to say, “Congrats, Aalders.” Without taking his hand off the girl, he gives Max’s shoulder a hard, hard squeeze, shaking his entire body as he does. “I just hope it sticks this time.”

Max pulls away with a frown. Then the frown turns into a smirk. “It will,” he finally drawls, “don’t you worry about *that*.”

“Never say never, right?” Howe replies in a humming voice, his eyes darting to mine for a second, my throat instantly tightening.

“But won’t the happy couple have a dance to celebrate?” he asks, seemingly earnestly and with a little squint, as he takes a step back, pulling the girl more tightly to him.

“I think we should, yes,” I hear Max say as he gets up off his chair.

“That’s more like it,” Howe says with a little smile, looking only at my fiance, tips his head in a greeting and finally leaves us be, the girl holding onto his arm even more snugly.

When I turn my eyes back onto him, Max is holding his hand out for me.

Feeling this overwhelming numbness, I have to force myself to get up and let him lead me into the crowd, where he puts his hands on my waist and starts waltzing with me, slowly and in perfectly measured steps. “Isn’t this nice?” he leans to whisper in my ear.

I nod, but all I can think about is how I just sat there right now, unable to move, unable to speak, unable to do fucking *anything*, making it perfectly clear exactly how uncomfortable I was, while he was being his most nonchalant self. As if nothing ever happened.

Of course, the very next second, I turn out to be wrong in thinking that was it for tonight. Because who do I see twirling that fae girl, practically right next to the two of us, but the asshole himself.

It makes all my muscles clench.

“Why so stiff?” Max leans to whisper in my ear.

I wrap my arms tighter around his shoulders. “I’m not,” I force myself to say, but I don’t pull away to look at him.

Because I can’t seem to tear my eyes away from Howe and his date, focusing on the way they’re barely dancing, more goofing around — him whispering stuff into her ear, making her burst into laughter and then dipping her, low, in this exaggerated but disarming move.

I grit my teeth, but I don’t look away.

“Come on, relax, cupcake,” I hear Max say as he pulls away, making me look at him as his thumbs stroke my lower back. “This time, we’re in it for good.”

Despite my mind buzzing like crazy, I smile as warmly as I can and I give him a kiss. But as soon as I go back to leaning my temple on his, my eyes land on the asshole again.

And it makes my stomach twist, what I see. He has her back pressed to his chest now, those big arms wrapped around her waist as he uses his teeth to slide the strap of her dress down her shoulder and then takes a bite out of her neck, making her squirm softly, with a breathless giggle I can’t bear to fully register.

I find myself prying Max’s hands off my waist, my mind buzzing uncontrollably.

“What is it?” he asks, but I can’t even look at him right now.

“Bathroom,” I just say.

And I rush out of the Main Hall and I stumble into the closest bathroom on the Ground Floor, finding myself alone, in silence, staring at my reflection in the mirror above the sink with my hands grabbing its sides, feeling as if I’m forever falling with a knife in my gut that just won’t stop twisting.

Chapter 30 - Dahrian

I see her pull away from that fucking asshole and walk out of the Main Hall, making me snap out of it and release the girl I'm holding in my arms.

"Thanks for the dance," I tell her as I throw her a glance, forcing myself not to be aggressive about it as I move to walk away.

With the corner of my eye, I see her eyebrows pull down and I hear her call out, "Dahrian."

But I'm already moving, fast, because I need to get to my pack before the urge to murder that fucking asshole kicks in. Kissing her, daring to kiss her right in front of my eyes.

Being surrounded by others is the only thing keeping me sane right now.

Party, it's a *party* I'm at, I tell myself and the feverishness floods me again, making me throw on a grin even before my eyes land on them, huddled in one corner of the Main Hall with their drinks untouched in front of them.

"What's going on here?" I demand, loudly and in an upbeat voice. "Why's no one drinking?"

And I know why it is. It's not like there aren't tensions, now that the last Game is tomorrow and they still haven't released our Archon.

"Well I guess you couldn't be more right," I say with a smirk and a shake of my head, letting my eyes sweep over the crowded Main Hall, bitterness

flooding my mouth. “This party right here, it’s absolute *shit*.”

I turn to my loyal right hand and I ask, in a booming, slightly theatrical voice that usually gets my pack in the mood for partying, “Ricky, what’s the closest place with dingy bars and rivers of alcohol?”

And it does the trick, everyone’s ears pricking and eyes lighting up.

Everyone’s except for Ricky’s. “What’re you talking about?” he asks with a frown.

“Bloodholm, Boss,” O’Malley cuts in, eager to help. “I know the words for the Pull.”

“Bloodholm it is then,” I say in a commanding voice, clapping my hands and motioning for them to get up. “Let’s get a move on.”

And they all do, except for Ricky, again, who just comes to stand in front of me, saying, “You can’t do that. You haven’t filed the paperwork for using the Pull.”

Paperwork. It makes blood start boiling in my veins.

I just look at him for a second. Then I let out a mocking little laugh. “Listen to this,” I drawl. “I haven’t filed the right *paperwork*.” And I let my eyes sweep over my pack, who start laughing with me.

“Oh I don’t think you understand, mate,” I say as I turn my eyes back onto Ricky, “I don’t have to give a shit about fucking *paperwork* anymore. Or fucking *rules* in general.”

And I push past him, kicking his shoulder with mine, the pack following me out of the Main Hall, across the Entrance Hall and into the Elevator.

But as soon as we step out into the gardens, where one of the Pull chambers is, Ricky comes to buzz around me again.

“Boss,” I hear him call out from behind my back.

I don’t reply. I just keep marching, wanting to get the fuck out of this place as soon as humanly possible.

Never, she said, I’m *never* getting back with him.

And I can’t fucking believe I came to this fucking party to seek her out. To ask her to forgive me and make all this stop.

“Hey, wait up,” Ricky insists as he rushes to walk around me and block my way.

I don’t hesitate. I grab him by the collar of his shirt and I pull him close, so close, our noses are almost touching.

And I can see the surprise on his face, but I don’t care. “I need to blow off some steam, Ricky,” I tell him in a low growl, “and I’m going to do it

with or without *your* fucking consent."

I let go of him, roughly, and he opens his mouth to say something, but I don't let him. "Now," I continue, barely managing my anger, "there's two ways this can go down. Me getting the fuck out of here, or me bashing your head to a pulp. But it's all going to go down real fast, so you might want to hurry up rolling the fucking dice."

For a second, he just blinks at me. "Give me five minutes of your time."

"Sure," I drawl as I get in his face again. "I'll give you five minutes." Before I know it, I'm finding myself saying, "Five minutes to explain how you let yourself be interrogated about what happened between me and the ex. Go."

And I take a step back, folding my arms and gritting my teeth.

"What're you talking about?"

That makes me let out an angry scoff. "Oh, you don't even remember future Mrs fucking Aalders getting you drunk so you'd talk about me and my *private* fucking business?"

By the time I'm done, I'm almost yelling.

But it doesn't faze him. "She did *what*?" he asks with a frown. Then he shakes his head. "Wait. You told me I no longer needed to help keep you away from her. So what's *this* now?"

"None of your fucking business," I snap as I move to walk away, cursing myself for succumbing to the temptation in the first place.

"You're my alpha and my family, Boss," Ricky pleads as he comes to block my way again. "How is it not my business?"

I lock eyes with him, throwing him a nasty little smile. "The fact, Ricky," I start, slowly and through gritted teeth, "that you were there for me when I broke up with Aisling, and the fact that I was there for you when you wanted to stop moping around and get out of your shell…" I pause for a second. "It does *not* mean we're family."

Now *that* makes him go pale in the face. "I think you've let yourself lose sight of the bigger picture here, Dahrian," he says somberly.

"Oh really?" I drawl.

"Yes," he says with a nod. "The Game is tomorrow and you're not here as a care-free student. You're here as the alpha that the Archon made her right hand."

"Yeah," I say, nodding angrily as I keep my eyes locked with him, "and I kept the peace and stayed until the end. And if Brogan weren't locked up

someplace they're not letting me into…" I find myself starting to raise my voice again. "Maybe I would've asked for further fucking orders, but seeing as she is, I think I'll have myself a few meagre hours of blowing off steam before I have to fight in the most dangerous Game of the entire year just so I'm finally allowed to get the fuck out of this hateful, *miserable* place."

Once I'm finished, for a second, there's only silence.

"You're missing the point of all this," Ricky says in a hushed voice. And he takes a step closer. "*Tomorrow*, Dahrian, it's *tomorrow* that's the point of all this. It's me, you, Aine and Lorcan against Nyx and Max. Don't you see? You're going to be saving your family, becoming a Professor, and who knows what else? Because I myself already see you as the Archon's successor. No, not just see you. It can only *be* you, since there's no one more capable of protecting the school than you. But all of that, it can only happen if tomorrow is executed well. Which is why, in a way, tomorrow is the day your future starts, and you need to be ready."

With that, he gives a nod and expels a breath, waiting for my response.

But there's this silence in my head where a snarky, ethereal voice used to be. "Is tomorrow *now*?" I drawl menacingly.

He just looks at me as if it's the first time he's seeing me. Like a fucking idiot. It only makes my anger flare up even more.

"Then I don't give a shit," I snarl at him, I turn on my heel and I start marching over to the rest of the pack, who are all standing outside the round cast-iron fence closing off the Pull.

"What're we waiting for?" I let my voice boom across the gardens, making my pack get all feverish, just like I am. "Let's go."

Chapter 31 - Nyx

When I step out of the bathroom, I'm not feeling any better, but I at least seem to have *some* control over myself.

And I find Max out on the hallway, scrolling on his phone, seemingly waiting for me. And I start marching up to him, determined to start paying all my attention to *him*, the man I'll be marrying and spending the rest of my life with.

So it's with a smile on my face that I come to stand in front of him, saying, "I'd like another dance, please."

To my surprise, when he looks up at me, putting his phone away, I find a dead serious face.

"Your brother," he starts so somberly, it instantly makes my eyebrows pull down, "he's out in the Gerhardt Yard."

Also known as the Junkyard — the problematic kids' hangout spot.

I feel myself start to fume. "So?" I ask, forcing a flatness into my voice.

"I think you should go talk to him."

"I'm in no mood for him right now."

I see his jaw clench. "He's making a spectacle of himself, Anastasya," he says through gritted teeth.

And I want to fucking scream, but instead, I just nod, I leave him standing there and I start marching over to the Junkyard.

What I see when I get there, the fake moonlight shedding more light than needed over crumbling statues and needle-littered grass, it's not just the usual stoned faces of students of all bloodlines.

It makes me stop midstep, near the center of the courtyard, and grit my teeth, when my eyes land on him.

Shirtless, with his suspenders down, floating in the air in the Zero Gravity Pocket, as the students like to call it, the side-effect of some long-forgotten magic that was cast within this courtyard.

And he's gotten himself quite a little audience, kids snickering as they watch him try to put his mouth around one of the floating drops of alcohol he's spilled inside the Pocket.

"Look, another one," he yells out as he finally gets it.

And the little crowd breaks out into cheering.

But then one of his admirers spots me, sees the fury in my eyes and waves a hand to get his attention with a scared look on his face.

And they all turn to look at me, my brother's grin sliding off his face, but I'm already marching straight towards him, the crowd parting as I go.

"Oh, what?" Nikolay yells out. "Come to tell me I'm being stupid? Huh? Seems to be all you can do."

I don't say anything. I just reach into the Pocket, and despite the resistance of zero gravity, I grab him by the hand and I yank him out, making him come crashing to the ground with a loud groan.

"Nyx," he calls out as I turn on my heel and start marching back, the little crowd having completely dispersed.

I feel him grab me by the hand and I stop, turning to look at him.

It makes my eyebrows pull down, when I see the change in his expression. He's drunk, his shoulders are slumping and he has this desperate, pitiful look in his eyes.

"Nyx, everything's so messed up," he whispers.

"No shit," I snap at him. And I move to walk away again.

"I need your help, sis," he urges as he rushes after me.

Once again, I stop and I turn to face him, throwing daggers at him. "And what is it *now*?" I ask through gritted teeth. "Want your ass wiped?"

His eyebrows shoot up. "What's gotten into *you*?"

"Oh sorry," I say mockingly, "are you noticing some kind of malfunction? Your sister's not working properly? You can't just push a button and make her do whatever you want?"

"When have I ever asked anything of *you*?"

It takes me a second to fight off a sudden, violent rush of anger. I'm forcing myself to breathe as I drawl, "*Just now*?" I let out a frustrated breath and continue through gritted teeth, "Asking things of me, it's all you *ever* do, Nikolay."

He narrows his eyes at me and says, angrily, "You know, Nyx, I don't know what your problem is and I don't care, but right now, bloody *Ricky* is being a better sibling than you are."

"Well, glad you've found a replacement," I snap at him. "I hope it works out for you. With some luck, you'll be able to grow old together, spending your days playing video games while raging at the world for not giving you what you want."

For a second, he just looks at me, this coldness flashing through his eyes. "You think because Father left you the land, that you're so important, do you?" he demands.

"So, we've finally come to the root of the problem, haven't we?" I let out a scoff. "Your fucking ego."

"It's the bloody respect you should be giving me," he snaps as he gets in my face. "*Zero* respect you've given me, all my life, you and Father. And I'm sick of it, I'm bloody sick of it."

I don't take a step back, I take one forward, making him double back and shooting him a nasty little look. "You know what, Nikolay?" I drawl through gritted teeth, "I know this little playground mommy built for you has made you believe you deserve respect by default. But let me tell you something about the *real* world. Respect is earned. Instead of crying about not having it, fucking *earn* it already, you fucking moron."

By the time I'm done, I'm practically yelling, finding myself turning my back to him and storming off.

"Yeah?" he yells after me. "Oh you'll see. I'll *make* you respect me. You hear me? And you're no longer my sister, just so you know."

But it's just as I start walking down the hallway leading back to the Main Hall that I spot Hilde rushing over.

"Nyx," she starts, stopping midstep and raising her eyebrows as soon as she spots me.

"Fuck off, Hilde," I say as I try to push past her.

"Nyx, what the hell is going on?" she asks as she walks around me, blocking my way.

“What the hell is going on?” I echo bitterly. “You mean, besides perfection? I do have the perfect life, don’t I? I have more land than anyone should ever have, I have my *exemplary* little family and I’m marrying a prince, for the second time in a year no less. I’ve even got the fucking bling. What more could a girl want, right?”

For a second, she just looks at me. “I know something happened during the Fourth Game,” she says in a near whisper.

“No no,” I jump straight in, seething inside, “you *want* for something to have happened during the Fourth Game.”

I wait for her to blink at me stupidly before I get in her face and spit out, poison in my voice, “Because you’re spineless and you’re pointless and you have no life besides sticking your nose in other people’s business.”

“Wow,” she says as she swallows around a lump in her throat. Yet she looks at me like I’m being pathetic. “I think you’re in serious need of a shoulder to cry on.”

It makes me fucking snap.

I grab her by the neck and I hurl her into the wall behind her, her eyes rounding in fear when I focus on the blood rushing down the veins in her arm.

And I make said arm slam itself up into the wall next to her face, palm facing me, fingers outstretched.

Without a second of hesitation, I whip out my knife, spin it around my fingers and drive the tip into the wall between her thumb and her forefinger, making her let out a shaky breath as I feel all her muscles stiffen.

“From now on, little cousin,” I lean to whisper in her ear, “every time you address me, you risk losing a finger. How’s *that* for something to cry about?”

To my surprise, when I pull away and let her go, her hands fly to her throat, but she still has that look in her eyes that’s telling me I’m being pathetic.

I let out a scoff and I walk away, my chest heaving with even more unbearable anger.

Give, give, give, it’s all they ever want me to do. Give until I want to gouge my fucking eyes out, screaming what else is there for me to fucking give.

I have to get at least some of this out of my fucking system, I curse, otherwise I might find myself becoming the first person to actually die

during a Game tomorrow.

And without me even knowing it, my feet lead me straight back to Lilith Tower, all the way up to the rookery and through the hidden door into Vasilisa's room.

*

"Vasilisa," I snap, still breathing heavily, as soon as I close the door behind me.

Then I just keep standing there as she walks out of the portrait, giving me a suspicious once-over before she finally frowns.

"Has something happened, girl?"

"Yes," I say without hesitation and with determination in my voice. "You love talking boy problems, don't you?"

"No," comes a cutting reply. "Come find me when you're no longer hysterical."

And she moves to walk back into the portrait.

"If you agree to hear *this* particular story," I insist as I block her way, "you'll get to hear all about me being *ridiculously* fucking stupid, like you wouldn't believe."

She squints at me for a second. "Well, when you put it like that..."

And she comes to lean on the wall next to the portrait, folding her arms, putting the sole of one boot up and frowning at me as I let myself go off the rails.

"So," I start as I angrily pace up and down the room in front of her, "I broke up with my fiance — this was months ago — and that very same night, I started this little thing with one of the Fiains, telling myself it'd be just that. Casual sex. And for a while, it *was*."

I stop to stare at her. "But now it's done. Because you know what happened?"

"*Somehow*, I think I do."

"I fell for him."

"Shocking."

"But it *is*, to *me* at least," I say as I keep angrily pacing. "I mean, the guy's a real player. Checks all the boxes — the looks, the charm, the short attention span," I add with a bitter scoff.

And my eyes narrow as I say, still pacing and gritting my teeth, "But I went into it thinking I *knew* what guys like him do. You know what I mean?"

“Let me guess, you *didn’t*?” comes a snarky reply.

“No, I *didn’t*,” I snap as I stop to face her. “I sure as hell didn’t expect him to make me feel like I was the only girl in the world,” I drawl mockingly, “and the most special one at that. And it sounds so obvious when I say it, of course.”

“Congratulations on figuring it out. Now—”

“No,” I say with a wave of my finger in her face, “it’s only *now* we’re getting to the best part.”

“Oh, aren’t they all?” she drawls, sarcasm dripping from every word.

But I’m already back to pacing, only now I’m throwing furious hand gestures into the mix as well. “Now that it’s done — and this is so fucking ridiculous, mind you — I actually find myself surprised and hurt about the fact that I don’t matter to him. I walk around expecting him to show up, to try to chat me up or drag me to one of his parties or just plain seduce me into meeting up with him again. And when I don’t get it, and I keep not getting it, it’s like, I don’t want to live in a world like that. He made me hate my fucking life because he’s no longer in it.”

And I stop and I turn to stare at her, finding her rolling her eyes at me with a heavy sigh.

“Yeah,” I say. “I know. And you know what’s worst of all?”

I don’t wait for a reply.

“He *warned* me,” I spit out, bitterly. “The night we agreed to become fuck buddies, he *told* me he knew I’d fall for him. And I laughed in his face and then proceeded to fucking fall for him.” I let out an incredulous scoff. “How ridiculously stupid is *that*? Didn’t I tell you it would be?”

She quirks her eyebrow at me. “Oh, so you’re done with your little pity party?”

“Yes.”

“And now you want to know what I think?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

She pushes herself away from the wall to get in my face, staring deep into my eyes when she says, in this disturbingly flat voice, “I was fourteen when they first dragged me out of bed and gave me to a husband who fucked me raw and then proceeded to whore me out to people he needed favors from. I was twenty one when he tortured and killed a lover of mine in front of my very eyes. And I was a hundred and twelve when I risked taking on another, only for them all to end up stabbing me in the back because of their egos.”

I just blink at her. It makes my anger die down a little, the shock that seems to have taken its place.

"Suffice to say," she keeps going, ignoring the incredulous look in my eyes and starting to slowly walk around me, "I don't do romance of *any* kind."

She comes to a stop in front of me, her cold eyes narrowing. "So if you think I'll be helping you make your little boy toy fall for you, you're dead wrong."

"No, we won't be doing *that*, don't worry," I say, starting to feel more like myself than I've felt in a long time. "Besides, you've already given me what I wanted."

"Really?" she asks, quirking an eyebrow as she takes a step back. "That's it?"

"Yeah," I say with a determined nod. "Just needed some tough love," I continue in a flat, calm voice. "Someone who'd show me exactly how insignificant my problems are by talking about child-bride rapes and other delightful stuff like that. So thanks, Vasilisa. Now we can move on to discussing more important stuff."

And I open my mouth to tell her what I found out by eavesdropping on my fiance, but she doesn't let me.

"Wait," she says, now squinting at me with this weird look on her face.

I nudge her to talk.

And she does, in a near whisper. "Would you like to know what *really* happened a hundred and fifty six years ago?"

The question makes me hold my breath. For a second, there's silence, before I realize she's waiting for me to reply and I just nod vigorously, gesturing with my arms for her to start fucking talking.

"Maybe I should start from the beginning," she says, capturing *all* my attention. I don't say anything, I don't even move.

I just watch her let out a sigh as she comes into a low crouch, starting to trace circles in the stone floor in front of her with a pensive look in her eyes. "I was born in 1703, the third daughter to Archduke Orlov. As I already said, they married me off to Peter the Great when I was fourteen years old."

She scoffs, but she doesn't look up. "And I can only imagine what the history books would say, but it was mostly *my* efforts that made him *great*. For one hundred and forty years, I was a Queen ruling from the shadows. In

1846, when we finally agreed on the Unveiling, I was there. In 1847, when we executed it, I was there."

Still holding my breath, I watch her shake her head. "And the next twenty years, those twenty years were *brutal*. The Scions publicly executing captured Originals and Originals wreaking havoc in the Scions' communities. But that's how O'Connor and I met, at strategy sessions."

My eyebrows shoot up.

"Now, O'Connor was a king himself, a shifter king, powerful, handsome, amazing in bed. And he didn't seem to feel threatened, like other men did, by my being a queen. And for a while, we were lovers. Then, one year, during the Games, while Grimm Academy was winning, I found him trying to tamper with the Box to rig the Games."

What the…

She looks up, catches the look in my eyes and clicks her tongue.

"But if you're thinking *that's* where it all went wrong… It didn't. It went wrong the following year, after I finally got fed up with my husband threatening to send me to live the rest of my life out in a convict every time my actions hurt his pride. I killed him and took the throne for myself."

She pauses, making me hold my breath. "Sadly, I only ended up getting two years to rule on my own."

Those must've been the two years I could find almost no information on — 1865 and 1866. And I have so many questions, but I don't linger on it. I nudge her to explain.

She gives me this weird little smile and says, "It was the same year O'Connor's country got attacked, took serious damage and only avoided being wiped out because I led my army against his enemies."

She looks away for a second. "My lover never did manage to let it go, me saving him."

"And?"

She lets out an annoyed sigh. "It stopped being enough for him to try to rig the Games. In 1867, the year of the Umbrage, first he got Grimms and Fiains to turn on each other. Then, slowly, throughout the course of the entire year, as I later found out, he looked for ways to use the Box to steal Grimm Academy's Heart's power. And he almost succeeded, during the Fifth Game, until I caught him and he waged war against me. But you know what he did then?"

I shake my head.

“He lured me into a trap, talking about love and whatnot, and he trapped me in this portrait and he used all his resources, magical and otherwise, to wipe all traces of my ever having existed.”

“He did *what*?” I ask, my eyebrows pulling down.

“And he told me he’d be using the same methods to make it seem as if *we* were the ones trying to rig the Games and eventually starting the Umbrage.”

She pauses for a second, letting out a scoff. “Men. They will only ever want to make you small and take away all your power.”

Then, without taking her eyes off me, she gets up, making me follow suit, and she gets in my face and says, “So you know what you need to do? You need to come to realize that love… it’s just an urge that’s best overcome, girl. Nothing more to it.”

For a second, there’s silence as we just stare into each other’s eyes, the look in hers growing strangely soft.

Then she turns her back to me and comes to stand in front of the portrait, looking over her shoulder. “Come see me after tomorrow’s Game,” she says, suddenly sounding worn out. “But not without a way to destroy this fucking portrait. I’m sick and tired of everything. I just want eternal sleep.”

And with that, she walks into the painting and disappears.

I just keep standing there, her words ringing in my ears. And they make me realize I wasn’t just being a little bitch about Howe. I was being a little bitch about everything.

And just like that, my mind is exploding with the images of the kind of future I’ve never even dared conjure up for myself. The kind of future in which I say fuck it and actually do what *I* think should be done.

And it’s scary because it’s major and it’s not what anyone would expect of me.

But I’m already working on a strategy.

So it’s only when I turn on my heel and move for the door that I realize I haven’t told Vasilisa anything about the Judge figurine.

But she’s finally told me her story and she can’t really give me anything more than that.

Besides, I can feel it in my bones, that I already know what the figurine is all about. There’s someone out there looking for revenge, and I don’t know why, but *that’s* how they think they’ll get it.

*

For the Fifth Game, the very last one, they’re taking us back into the Arena. And this is where it all started, nearly a year ago. So it’s with bitterness in my mouth that I walk next to Max, letting the noisy, unruly crowd take me down the same path I walked with him that time, from the Dame Gothel statue and across the fields to the north, the sun shining bright above us.

And there’s so much excitement on the faces of all the people around me, but all I can think about is how it could happen. How the revenge could take place.

Will it be a sudden attack during the Game or will the Game itself be part of it all?

There are a million questions like that swarming in my head, but they all remain unanswered.

And soon, I find myself entering the Arena through the back, the world falling silent around me as I follow Max down the hallway to the players' entrance.

All four of them are already there, standing around the door into the Ring. Ricky. Aine. Lorcan. Him.

And when my eyes first land on him, it makes me feel good to see how well it worked, my little chat with Vasilisa. He catches my eye for a second and then looks away, but besides the bitterness, I feel absolutely nothing at all, I think with a smile tugging at my lips.

When the two of us come to stand close to them, no one says a word. We all give each other quick nods, except for me and a certain someone ignoring each other, and that certain someone throwing Max another one of those nasty little smiles.

But the atmosphere is a tense one, there being four Fiains and only two Grimms in the finals not helping.

So no one makes any small talk. No one even says anything.

Luckily, almost as soon as we join, the door into the Ring opens and the noise spills out, making me take a deep breath, throw an excited glance at Max and start walking in.

The temporary Guardian of the Obscura is already waiting for us at the center of the Ring, the Box in his hands, with the Pied Piper and Gleason once again substituting for the Archon as the Fiain Academy representative.

And we do the little ceremony, us players bowing and retreating to the edge of the Ring, the audience clapping, the two representatives activating

the Box by shaking hands…

It all just makes me want to keep rolling my eyes, that's how tiresome it is.

But then the Guardian opens the Box, and as the Pied Piper and Gleason leave for the Pied Piper's booth, he takes a figurine out.

My heart skips a beat.

Hourglass. It's the hourglass figurine, I tell myself, breathing a sigh of relief.

And he flings it in the air and goes to take a seat in his chair with the Box in his hands.

For a second, there's almost total silence.

The next thing I know, the people in the audience are letting out a low murmur as an enormous hexagonal board with stairs along its edges shoots out from the ground and falls back down with a monstrous thud.

My eyes round in surprise when I see the elaborate central stone tower, the city, the forest, the mountain...

Shadowscape, I think to myself, a sudden thrill flooding me.

Hourglass flips and the sand starts running, but the six of us remain pinned in place for a moment, assessing the situation.

I throw a glance at Max, who smiles at me and says, "I guess we'll be having ourselves a rematch, cupcake."

I throw a smile back, but it only gets bigger once we walk up to the hexagon and I see the thrones, one at each tip of the six-sided structure.

Fucking thrones. We won't just be standing around the board, I think as I start circling it, trying to pick one for myself.

Usually, in multiplayer, you roll the dice for it. But here, there's no such thing, so everyone does what I do, trying to gauge which of the six slices of territories is the juiciest.

I see Max walk over to the biggest one, pale metal with studs all over. And there's a smile on his face, as if he's particularly pleased with his choice, as he climbs into it and looks down at me.

"Compensating for something, Aalders?" I hear Howe say as he picks a smaller one, made of carved bones.

"Mind your own fucking business, Howe," Max snaps at him.

I roll my eyes.

And I walk up to the one I'll call Shadow Throne, a beautiful thing made of something black and ethereal, like wisps of dark magic.

I climb up and I take my seat, letting my eyes sweep over Ricky in a throne of gnarled wood, Lorcan of molten lava, and Aine just getting settled into the one of glowing crystals.

And as soon as she does, the entire board starts glowing, the audience bursting into cheering and the throne under me vibrating with life.

It's only then that it hits me, what it means — playing this game with five other people and Hourglass dictating its duration.

There won't necessarily be a single winner, just like in multiplayer Shadowscape. Everyone still holding onto their armies by the end will be proclaimed winners.

My lips tug into a smile. And it's going to be Max and me.

*

The glow dies down and the throne under me goes back to feeling lifeless. And just as I wonder how exactly I'll be able to make my moves, the board produces this soft clicking sound.

And it rotates, quickly, by ninety degrees, and then comes to a full stop, making that sound again.

Fuck. I chose myself a good piece of land only to have it switched out for a wasteland, I think as I stare at the stretch of black sand before me.

In Shadowscape, there are only two ways to win.

Take the Tower.

Or take everything.

And everyone starts with an army of the same size, I think as I let my eyes sweep across the board, a hundred or so miniature soldiers on each slice of land, divided into two. But it's important what kind of land you're on because of the resources.

And *my* shit land seems to have none, unlike Max's with the mountain, Ricky's with the pastures, Lorcan's with the city, Aine's with the forest and Howe's with the river.

Just as I think that, Howe's throne glows, signaling his is the first move.

He has two choices now, attack or pass. If he passes, he might be rewarded with new resources, thus making his army stronger. Or he can attack and take more territory for himself.

And his land is sandwiched between Max's and Aine's, so it doesn't surprise me when his lips curl into a smile and, without me seeing how, he uses his army to attack Max.

But it does surprise me when the clashing armies get swept up into the air and enlarged, the crowd going wild as an actual battle starts to unravel before all our eyes.

It gives me a thrill, making me eager to make my own move, when Howe's soldiers wipe the floor with Max's, blood spraying, and most of Max's forces get pulled into Howe's little slice of land.

But as soon as that happens, I hear this sickening sound followed by gasps from the audience.

My head snaps to Max, who's gritting his teeth, nasty gashes covering his entire body.

Fuck fuck fuck, I curse to myself as soon as I realize what's going on. Whatever injuries your forces sustain in battle, you suffer them yourself.

It seems this will be a painful ride.

I look away as soon as the Game chooses Max as the next player, my eyes fixing on my own territory, trying to decide whether I should play this the way I normally do — going for the other player's territories.

The alternative is a lot trickier, I think with a frown. You go for the Tower when you're not ready and it's game over.

But this time, considering how weak my territory is… I think I'm forced to do exactly that.

The rest of the players, for their turns they all choose to attack neighboring territories — some winning, some losing, all sustaining blood-curdling injuries.

But once it's my turn, once my own throne starts glowing, I feel tendrils wrap around my mind, *Mind Magic* tendrils. Of course. And I feel the connection with my territory and my army, and I only need to decide to pass this round for the next throne to start glowing.

And of course, my shit land gives me zero resources as a reward.

Next is Howe. And though it's currently *not* a smart move for him, he chooses to attack Max again.

I let out an annoyed sigh, but the next thing I see makes me quickly turn serious. Howe's army attacks, but this time, instead of using swords and shields against enemy troops, they use what looks suspiciously a lot like that cafeteria stunt of Howe's to turn Max's mountain into dust.

Fuck. We can channel our own magic through our armies? I sense the other players shift in their thrones as well.

I watch Howe wipe the floor with Max, grinning like an asshole, especially when Max's face starts turning blue with the impact.

And for a second, our eyes meet, and I can't help but roll mine. He catches that, his expression sobering.

I myself keep letting rounds pass, gathering *some* resources, though not many, but now that I know what I know… I think the next move will be my move for the Tower.

I only need to wait for Ricky to finish his turn.

Fuck, I think to myself when he turns his focus onto me. And he sends his army to crush me, but there's not much resistance from them when I push back.

It makes me frown, but the next thing I know, my soldiers are wiping the floor with his. They obliterate every single one of them, making Ricky grab onto the armrests of his throne as blood starts spurting out of his mouth.

And just as I sense everyone around me draw in a breath, he gets zapped out onto the bleachers, leaving his throne empty.

He'll be fine. They'll patch him right up. I feel my muscles relax a bit, but I don't get any time to celebrate.

Aine is next and she seems to be bent on destroying me as well.

Her army takes half of mine, making me almost cry out with pain as the phantom blades cut into my body, warm blood dripping down my skin.

As her soldiers make themselves comfortable on my land, I hear Max let out a chuckle. I turn to shoot him a squint.

But I still have half of my soldiers, and I still have my magic. So once my throne starts glowing, I only hesitate for a second, frowning at the fact that the part of my territory Aine has taken still feels… in my control somehow.

I shrug it off and I choose to go for the Tower after all, making my move as soon as my throne starts glowing.

And my army rises up into the air, enlarged, but instead of attacking with brute force, I use my stealth to sneak up on the Tower, catching its army by surprise.

My heart skips a beat when I see it's worked. I sense other players hold their breaths, this being the first move for the Tower of the match.

But the next thing I know, the enemy army is throwing such strong shadow magic at mine, that I get nearly obliterated.

Fuck, I curse as tendrils of magic wrap themselves around me, making my blood boil and nasty red bruises start appearing all over my body.

Max lets out another chuckle, and the pain is making me gasp for air, but as soon as it's clear I won't be zapped out, I look up to shoot him a stare.

As soon as the pain subsides a little and we're onto the next player, my mind rushes back to the moment before I attacked. That feeling that the territory that was taken from me was still in my control.

It's then that a possibility enters my mind, a possibility that would go well with the fact that we can use our own magic here. And I come up with an entirely different plan.

*

I'm letting the remaining four *almost* wipe the floor with me whenever they attack. I sneakily use my Blood Magic on parts of their armies that settle into my territories. Of course, from the outside, it looks just like me passing another round, earning myself a snicker from Max every single time.

He himself seems accumulates quite an army, especially when he wipes the floor with Aine, receiving such an impact from his forces that she gets sent flying back, along with the throne. Still midair, she gets zapped out.

But then Howe, who seems to have smartened up and moved on from his obsession with Max's land, attacks Lorcan, making me hold my breath.

He succeeds, making Lorcan let out a scream when the invisible blades cut into him, zapping him out of the Game. And this is a real victory for him, I think to myself when I see he's now the strongest of us all.

I refuse to pay any attention to the self-satisfied smirk he throws at the murmuring audience.

But this is a victory for *me* as well, because I've already gotten my hands on some of Lorcan's army.

Still, when the Game chooses Max for the next move, I just know who he's going to attack. I have a much weaker army than Howe.

And Max does turn to me and I do intend to let him win, barely, so I can get at least a part of his army under my control as well. But what I see flashing through his eyes when he moves to attack is this *expectation* for me to let him get his way.

It makes me so pissed, I completely disregard the fact that this is the *dumbest* fucking move for me right now.

And when the Box's magic pulls up and enlarges our two armies clashing, I grit my teeth and I ball my hands into fists, channeling all my magic into the few soldiers I can use without showing my hand.

Within two seconds, I'm spitting blood from the injuries his army's inflicting on me and I'm down to so few soldiers, I fear I'll get zapped out the Game any moment now.

Then I feel my magic's become weaker and I whip out my knife and I cut into my forearm, sensing a look from Max's direction.

I look up at him, still gritting my teeth and making his eyebrows pull down when my army starts *killing* his.

I watch his uniform get soaked with blood, his eyes rounding in what seems to be a mix of surprise and fear, before he gets zapped out.

And just like that, it's just me and Howe, I think as I turn to face him. And sure, he has a bigger army, but he doesn't know it's all mine, from when he took from Aine, Lorcan, Max…

I smile when I see his throne glow. *His* will be the first move, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

My smile only grows wider when he moves to attack and fails to do anything. I feel the control over his armies deep in my bones. He doesn't give up easily.

I can see the determination on his face as he tries to use the sheer power of will, then his shifter magic, then the power of will all over again. I know how much he wants this, but that doesn't mean I'm supposed to give it to him.

"What the…" I see him mouth.

And I can hear and sense shifting from the audience as well.

But the Box signals it's my turn now. And this is not something I've planned all along, but I feel the need to linger in the moment, watching his eyes narrow at me.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demands, making my eyebrows shoot up. And it's more serious than angry, when he says, "Are you fucking holding back now, Romanov?"

"Oh I'm not," I say with a smirk that only grows wider when an idea pops into my mind that I just can't resist.

Finally, I move to attack, making him flinch a little before all the soldiers currently on the board fly up and get enlarged.

Spotting his eyebrows pull down and hearing low, feverish chatter from the audience, I use my Blood Magic to keep all the remaining soldiers in the air for a moment.

Before I shut my eyes.

And make them all burst in a shower of blood, spraying everyone and everything around me.

When I open my eyes, for a second, there's silence, Howe staring at me intently, all covered in blood, looking as if it's dawning on him, what I did.

My head snaps up and I see Hourglass glow with a green light before it gets sucked back into the Box, my Shadow Throne starting to glow green as well. The crowd goes wild.

I won. I fucking won, I think as music starts blaring from the speakers.

I see Howe get out of his throne, and I'm still stumbling out of my own, when I sense Max's presence to my right.

I turn to look at him, frowning when I see he's not smiling.

But it's not me he's marching toward. It's Professor Byrne, just getting up out of the Guardian's chair behind my back.

I watch Max come to a stop in front of the temporary Guardian. "It was cheating," he says through gritted teeth, making my eyebrows pull down. "She was cheating," he repeats in a raised voice.

The music stops, abruptly, and I can feel everyone's eyes on us, my cheeks burning with sudden embarrassment.

I see Professor Byrne throw him a confused look, but Max doesn't let it deter him. He comes to jab an angry finger in front of his face. "You know what you're going to do?" he demands, obviously completely forgetting himself. "You're going to fucking *fix it*."

"What are you talking about?" Professor Byrne mutters. "It's the Box's decision and the Box has decided."

We all watch as Max takes a step back, seemingly barely controlling his anger. "I demand you tell me who chose you for this position," he spits out, raising his voice so it echoes through the Ring, "because I'm not letting this slide."

It's at that moment that I see Aine get back into the Ring and start walking up to him, and I can tell by the look on her face that she's planning on trying to appease him.

Me? I know better by now.

I just watch him as he spots her, turns to face her and spits out, "What do *you* think you're doing, you filthy Fiain?"

She stops midstep, her face twisting in disgust.

I feel mine do the same and I turn on my heel and start marching out of the Ring, the ceremonies be damned.

I hear him yell out, “Anastasya, come back here.”

I don’t listen, I just keep marching until I’m walking through the door from which we came and into the comforting silence of the hallway.

It makes me stop midstep, all my muscles tensing up, when he comes to block my way. “As my future wife, you can’t be disrespecting me like that,” he says through gritted teeth.

For a second, I just look at him, my mind flooding with the memory of the two of us playing that game of Shadowscape on the night of the Opening Ceremony. It stayed with me, that much is true. I just never thought it’d be representative of the way my entire life with him would be.

But it would. So I lift my hand and I pull the ring off my finger. “I want you to take this,” I tell him, flatly, as I hold it out for him.

Still flushed with anger, he shakes his head, refusing to do as I say. “No,” he tells me in a commanding voice, “you’re not doing this.”

I get in his face, finding myself surprised at how calm I am. “Oh you’re *never* again telling me what I am or am not doing. Understood?”

And I drop the ring to the floor, finding myself changing my mind about the next steps. Instead of the exit, I start marching back to the Ring.

“Anastasya,” I hear him call out as he rushes after me.

But I just keep walking. I’m not letting him take my victory away from me. Not this time. Not ever.

Chapter 32 - Dahrian

Leaned against the wall, I wait with Aine and Lorcan by my side, my mind buzzing. I spot them as soon as they reenter the Ring, Romanov moving for the largest group, the one at the center, and fucking Aalders falling back, as if he's changed his mind about something.

And his little temper tantrum has managed to derail stuff, leaving us players, the professors and some of the more important people from the audience chatting as we wait for the winner so we can be led out of the Arena and into the Dining Hall for some tedious closing ceremony.

I turn my eyes back onto Romanov, watching her say hi to people. I could just walk up to her right now, but I don't want a two-second interaction in passing. It'll probably be our last one, I think as my heart sinks low into my stomach. And I'm feeling different than I felt before the Game started, mostly thanks to that look she threw me while we were still playing. Like I was a disappointment.

And no look has ever hurt more, which is why I now have to thank it for thinking I actually might have a normal conversation with her.

So I wait for one of the staff to start leading her back to the exit, into the hallway from which she came.

Just before everyone else starts moving as well, I tear myself away from the wall and signal for Aine and Lorcan not to wait for me.

I catch up with Romanov just as she walks through the exit.

I see her stiffen, but she stops and gives me a curt nod. I motion at the door to my right, the one leading into the room where players go to prepare.

She hesitates, but then dismisses the girl accompanying her out of the Arena and we walk inside. I close the door behind me and turn to her.

"Romanov."

"Howe."

For a second, I just look at her. "It seems congratulations are in order," I finally say, giving her a smile. "And I mean, wow." I shake my head. "Like, I'll be able to proudly say I once fought with you in the Games." I pause for a split second before I say, "You really are something."

It makes her cheeks flush with the most tempting shade of pink. "Thank you," she says curtly. "The feeling is mutual." Another nod and now she's already moving to walk away, adding in a rushed voice, "I wish you all the best. Have a safe trip home tomorrow."

For a second, I hesitate. And I know I've absolutely no right to be pushing *myself* into the picture, but stopping her from making a huge, huge mistake? That's something a friend can do as well.

So I rush after her, stopping myself from trying to take her hand and instead coming to block her way, her eyebrows immediately pulling down. I lock eyes with her. "You're really going to marry him?" I ask in a low voice, recalling the way fucking Aalders acted when she won. Not the way a proud, loving fiance does.

She takes a deep breath and says, "I appreciate you coming to congratulate me, Howe. What I *don't* appreciate is your tone right now."

"Come on," I urge her, "you know I'm only looking out for you."

"Who's asking you?" she snaps. "And no, I *don't* know that. In fact, I don't know *you*, as you've spent the last month showing me."

This time, I block her before she even moves to walk away again. It's in a low, rushed voice that I lean in to say, "I guess it's not just princesses that throw temper tantrums."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" she demands, her eyes narrowing.

It makes me want to pull my fucking hair out, being unable to speak freely. "Look," I say as I take her hand, "if the situation were any different..."

What I'm hoping she'll hear is, "Break up with him and choose *me* instead."

But she doesn't. She just snatches her hand away and looks at me as if I'm not well.

"But it's not, of course," I rush to say, "so please, let me just say this." I hesitate for a second, but then I jump straight in. "He's not the man for you," I tell her.

And I can see her start to get mad, but I keep going, more fervently. "He doesn't respect you, he doesn't care about your wellbeing, he doesn't even seem to see you for who you really are. He's not giving you what you need."

For a second, she just looks at me. "How dare you suggest you know what I need?"

"I can see you're not getting what you deserve."

"No such thing. There's only what we choose."

"Fine," I almost snap, "then don't choose anyone who'd do anything less than *worship* you, every single day, like there's no tomorrow."

"Me, choose *me*," that's what I want to say.

She rolls her eyes. "For your information," she says with a sigh, "I've already made my choice. I've chosen *myself*."

And she lifts her hand to show she no longer has a ring on it.

It renders me speechless for a second. Then it sends a flood of relief and longing coursing through my body. And I move to take her in my arms, but before I can even lay a finger on her, she slinks back, raising a hand and shaking her head to stop me.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demands.

"You've just said you're no longer with him."

It's a defiant one, the look she throws me. "And why does that make you think I'll come running to *you*? Didn't you hear what I just said?"

For a second, I just blink at her. Then I move to get closer again, saying, "Nyx, if you'd only give me—"

"No," she cuts me off, so serious, it hurts. "I don't want to hear another word about it. I'm sick and tired of you all. I just want to be left alone."

And I just can't believe I lost my chance the second after I thought I got it, but she's moving to walk away and, right now, there's nothing more important than the way I part with her.

"I'm sorry," I rush to say as I block her, again, "I'll stop. And I'll get out of your hair, I promise." I pause to get just a little closer.

And I drop my voice a little, all of a sudden feeling all the pain of never getting to look into her eyes again.

"Just do me this one little thing, it's all I ask," I urge her. "When you think of me, don't think of the past month, I beg of you." And I sense her tense up a little, and I put all my tenderness into the words I nearly whisper, "Just know there's someone out there who will forever be on your side, hoping with all his heart you get everything you've ever dreamed of."

And now I can tell by the look in her eyes that I've made her uncomfortable, and I'm not having *that* as her last reaction to me.

So I pull away a little and I say, in a louder, more upbeat voice, "And congratulations on the win once again, Romanov." I have to grit my teeth to do it, but I do it. "I wish you a long and happy life."

Her eyes soften a little, making it all worth it. "Thank you, Howe. I wish a long and happy life to you, too."

Do you really, I think to myself. Give me a chance then.

But I don't say anything. I just give her a smile and keep standing there, watching her open the door and get out, feeling as if she's taking my heart away with her, raw and exposed and forever aching.

And for the first time in what seems like an eternity, I sense my fox stirring within me.

He doesn't say anything.

Still, I feel him there.

My eyebrows pull down when I see that fucking asshole walk up to her to pester her again.

And I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me. She did just tell me she won't have anything with me regardless of fucking Aalders. Still, I fail to stop myself from getting close enough to hear what he's telling her.

"I was in shock, cupcake," he urges. And she's not throwing him a single glance, instead moving for the girl waiting for her, but he's not giving up, making me grit my teeth. "Come on," he keeps saying in a fervent voice, "if you agree to forget about this, I'll do whatever you want."

She stops to shoot him a nasty look.

The very next moment, she moves to walk away again, but he blocks her way. "Want a diamond tree? You'll get one. Want an entire year in the tundra? You'll get it. Bloody hell," he keeps going, "if you want your own country, I'll find a way to give it to you."

“And what if I want you to take me seriously? You know, when I say I don’t want to talk to you ever again.”

That renders him speechless for a second. But then he leans to say something to her again and I snap when I see the way she slinks away.

I stalk over to them, I fix my eyes on him and I say through gritted teeth, “Why don’t you leave her the fuck alone?”

It makes both their heads snap to me.

But the next thing I know, there’s this tug behind my navel. I frown, meaning to glance around, but then, just like that, I feel this pull zap me out of the Arena.

*

I find myself in some hallway, my mind struggling to process what’s going on. There’s the three of us there — me, her and fucking Aalders, positioned exactly as we were a second ago, only in a different place altogether.

It takes me a second to realize it’s that same hallway I found myself in on my first night at the Academy.

But what really confuses me are the two figures standing a little farther down.

Ricky and Nikolay, my friend’s narrowed eyes glancing from Romanov to fucking Aalders.

It makes this dread seep into my bones, when I see he’s wearing the Guardian’s robes, complete with the pendant. And in his hands, he’s holding the Box itself.

It’s practically at the same moment that the three of us all get a move on, starting to close the distance between us and the mysterious duo.

“What’s going on here?” I hear fucking Aalders demand in that pompous little voice of his.

Then Romanov calls out, “Nikolay—”

But the next thing I know, her brother is shutting his eyes and we’re all freezing in place, these tendrils wrapping around my mind. I try to turn to Romanov, but I’m unable to move any of my muscles, unable to speak, unable to do anything but stand there.

Nikolay opens his eyes. “Didn’t I tell you I’d make you respect me?” he snaps at his sister. “Huh?”

It makes me grit my teeth when she doesn’t say anything.

Ricky lifts a finger to shush Nikolay. And he throws another glance at Romanov and fucking Aalders before he fixes his eyes on *me*.

He takes a step closer, so he's only an arm-length away, and he gives me this funny little smile. "I should've known I'd be getting the two of them here with you. As it turns out, it's all you've been doing this past year." He doesn't take his eyes off me, but he motions at Romanov. "Sniffing around *her*."

What the fuck is he doing? Did *he* bring us here somehow?

"But it doesn't matter," he continues with a shake of his head. "It can all still go just as I planned."

And he gives me another smile. "So now, Dahrian," he says, "Nikolay will let you speak, so you and I can have a little chat about the future."

I feel one tendril unwrapping.

I let out a pent-up breath. "Ricky," I warn as soon as I regain control of my vocal chords, "this is *not* funny."

He shakes his head, smiling. "I realize how you must be feeling right now, but don't worry, you'll come to understand everything soon enough. Let's start from the beginning, shall we?"

Gritting my teeth, I lock eyes with him and I tell him in a low but menacing tone, "Let's start with you releasing everyone here."

He straight-out ignores me. "How did I manage to do this, you're wondering?" he asks as he looks down at the Box in his hands. "Well, it took a year of planning, ever since I found out we'd be coming here for the Games, for the first time since the Umbrage happened. Now, to use the Box, I suspected I'd need to become the Guardian." He lets out a laugh. "How else does one do it?"

It makes me want to seriously hurt him. "Ricky," I snarl.

He doesn't even acknowledge my reaction. "But what *makes* a Guardian, you ask?" he keeps going with this excitement in his voice. "We know what spell binds him to the Box, but what makes him able to use it? No one knows, right?"

He shrugs. "So instead of just stealing the Box and failing to control it, what only an idiot would do, I went on to make sure the Box changed multiple Guardians while we were here."

"What did you do?" I demand, getting more worried by the second.

"First I needed to get rid of Schwarz," he says matter-of-factly. And then he starts pacing in front of me, listing. "I used these nifty little magic items

to injure our brothers during the First Game, to make it seem it was him. I killed the professor he was supposed to meet during the time he was supposed to meet him. I spiked his Winter Solstice Ball drink with maedea, ensuring his neurons would start firing in all the wrong ways so he'd endanger the fragile peace between us and, finally, be removed from the position of Guardian."

And he comes to stand in front of me with a smile on his face. There's a touch of pride in his voice when he says, "And that was just the first Guardian."

Now that makes me snap, the nonchalant admission to everything from lying to fucking murder. But then my mind rushes to Romanov standing there, in actual fucking danger, and I force myself to get it together and start trying to figure out a way to break this fucking spell.

"I tried doing something similar with the Archon," Ricky keeps going, "but she was just too… unpredictable and strong. So I used a part of my plan for this grand night," he says as he gestures at Romanov's brother, "my dear friend Nikolay, to help me with her. And together, we made her try using the Box in circumstances in which I knew she'd most definitely be caught, that is, during a Game. It was just an added bonus, seeing her try and fail."

Despite all my efforts, I fail to do anything to mess with Nikolay's Mind Magic. But it's at that moment that it finally occurs to me. The pack.

"So now it's three of them that I've managed to see in their Guardian roles," Ricky says. "And you know what that made me realize?"

I just grit my teeth, rushing to make a connection with every single member of my pack, *except* for him.

"It's the goddamn pendant," he says with a scoff, pointing at the necklace he's wearing. "Nothing more to it than that. How disappointing, isn't it? In the end, I only needed to jump that pitiful Byrne after the Game, knock him out and steal it from him."

He pauses, looking straight into my eyes as he tilts his head in suspicion. Then he smiles. "You won't be able to use that in here. It's for a reason I chose this hallway for our little chat. It cuts you off from everyone else."

Goddamnit, I think to myself.

"Fine, I'll bite," I spit out, my teeth gritting with rage at him putting us all in danger like this. "What do you think you're doing and why?"

“Glad you’re asking,” he replies with a smile. “The plan is to use the Heart Bond to set things right — to restore our Academy to its former glory and lead it into a new era with you by my side.”

“*That’s* what you were talking about last night,” I say with bitterness flooding my mouth. “You said I’m to become the Archon’s successor, but you weren’t talking about Brogan, were you? You were talking about *yourself*.”

“And *you*, Dahrian,” he says as he comes to get in my face, the smile sliding off his face and his voice turning a little feverish, “you said all you wanted was to get the fuck out of this hateful, miserable place, remember? Well…” He pauses for a second. It’s in a dead serious voice that he continues, “Side with me and we won’t just do *that*. We’ll burn the goddamn place to the ground.”

It’s at that moment that I hear Nikolay say from behind Ricky’s back, “What’re you talking about, you old fool?” He lets out a rough, confused laugh. “You said I’d become the Pied Piper and we’d—”

Ricky shushes him, fixing his eyes back on *me*. “Once you and I are done with our negotiations,” he tells me, “I’ll open up the Box and I’ll take one of the figurines out, the Judge. You know what Judge does? It evens the scales between the Academies. Which means that, after a hundred and fifty six years, we’ll finally get justice for what they did to us. There’ll *be* no more Grimm Academy.”

“Hey, Ricky,” Nikolay yells, angrily, as he moves to grab him by the shoulder. “That’s not what we agreed on, you bloody moron.”

But Ricky just turns to face him, lifting the Box he’s holding in his hands. And he slowly starts reaching for the lid with one hand, making Nikolay freeze in place, obviously not knowing what to do.

“Ricky,” I warn in a low snarl. “Stop it, Ricky.”

“You don’t want me to do this,” Ricky tells Nikolay as he motions at his sister. “It’s not just figurines that can be pulled out of the Box.”

Fuming, I once again strain all my muscles to try to break myself free of the spell. It doesn’t work. If he does it, I think with gritted teeth…

And I can see literal sweat beading on Nikolay’s forehead, and there’s a second of silence, but then his nostrils flare and his hands ball into fists.

“Nikolay,” Ricky calls out, a touch of concern in his voice. “I’m warning you.”

But the next thing I know, Nikolay is shutting his eyes and Ricky is taking a step back, grimacing in what seems to be an attempt to fight off his Mind Magic.

For a second, my heart pounds with the expectation of Romanov's brother ending this shit.

The next thing I know, Nikolay is starting to stumble around, his eyes closing, and Ricky is letting out a low, self-satisfied little snicker as he turns back to me. "He thought I wouldn't protect myself," he says with incredulousness in his voice.

I hear Nikolay come crashing to the ground. And now I'm unfreezing, my head snapping to my left to see the same happen with Romanov.

"You filthy shifter," fucking Aalders yells out as materializes in front of Ricky, moving to grab him by the throat.

Not wiping the smile off his face, Ricky only slinks back a little.

And both me and Romanov move, but before we can do anything to stop him, he creaks the Box open and quickly pulls something out, letting it fly up into the air.

Fuck, I curse when I see it's a humanoid shadow with countless grabbing arms coming to hover in front of fucking Aalders.

"Ricky," I shout, meaning to command him to get it the fuck back inside as my mind starts trying to strategize. This is all turning to shit real quick. How the fuck do I get her out of here alive?

But the very next moment, Aalders is doubling back with a terrified look on his face.

And despite not having come up with any tactics, I'm already moving, because Aalders is pushing past Romanov, making her yell out, "Max," as the creature shifts her focus onto her.

I see her try to use her Blood Magic, but the creature is reaching to grab her so I throw myself in front of it, almost instantly feeling so cold, it makes my mind go blank with shock.

When I come to, I'm still on my feet, but I'm swaying a little and I have to glance around to reassess the situation. Max is nowhere to be seen, Romanov is unharmed, catching her breath to my right, and Ricky is standing to my left with that creature hovering beside him.

"I didn't let it hurt you," he tells me. "I only want to talk."

I turn my eyes onto Romanov. "Get the fuck out of here," I order, using my most threatening voice, "*now*."

But she's not scared of me, she never was. She just shoots me a nasty look and keeps standing there. But she does motion at Ricky, signaling to me that she'll be gracious enough to let me try to do my thing before she makes any moves.

And I give her a nod, turning back to Ricky.

Who's smiling at me. He's fucking smiling at me as he refuses to stop keeping her in actual mortal fucking danger.

Pure rage starting to consume me, it takes all I have to calm the fuck down and say, "Alright."

*

I see Ricky's lips curl into a smile.

But I don't wait for him to start yet another little monologue. I take a step closer and I force myself to remember this is my friend standing right in front of me.

"Listen to me, Ricky," I urge him, feeling Romanov's eyes on me. "Remember what I said last night, about the two of us not being family?"

He shakes his head, still smiling, but I feel the need to keep going. "I wasn't being myself, mate. You *are* my family. You always will be." I take another step closer and I hold my hand out, making my voice even softer. "And what I want you to do now is give me the Box and go have a nice little chat with me, just to see where we're at and what we can do to fix things."

It's the creature that responds by getting a little closer, making me snatch my hand away and let out an angry breath.

But Ricky just smiles. "That's one of the things that made me choose *you*, Dahrian," he says. "You're a rare combination of a fighter and a diplomat. But I've already told you exactly what we'll do to fix things."

"Come on, Ricky, chasing revenge? I thought you were smarter than that."

"*Justice*, not revenge," he spits out, his face twisting in anger. "Goddamn justice that's a hundred and fifty six years overdue."

My ears prick up even before I hear Romanov ask him, "Does this have to do with your parents' death?"

I throw her a look over my shoulder, wondering how she knows about that.

But the next thing I know, Ricky is moving towards her and I'm pushing myself between the two of them as he leans to the side to spit out, "No, it's

you, you goddamn Grimms."

And it's a look filled with hate, that he's throwing her, making me ball my hands into fists and snarl at him, "Ricky, I'm *warning* you, mate."

He turns to me, taking a step back with this feverish look in his eyes. "They destroyed my family's dynasty in the Umbrage," he says through gritted teeth, raising his voice. "They destroyed our chances for survival, and because of that, one hundred and thirty seven years later, my parents were killed by the Heart's Magic, the very thing that was supposed to protect them."

Fucking hell, I think as it starts hitting me, how much I really don't know him. For a second, I just keep looking at him. Then I muster the strength to give it just one more try.

"Hey, just listen to me, please," I urge as I get a little closer, keeping one corner of my eye on the creature. "I won't pretend I know what you're going through, but if you let me, I'll do *everything* in my power to understand and to help you get through it."

"You know what you can do to help?" he snaps. "Agree to becoming my right hand. I'll be the new Archon, Dahrian." He pauses to look deeper into my eyes. "I'll be the only one standing between your family and a happy future."

It makes me grit my fucking teeth so hard, it hurts.

But he's already lifting the Box up again. "You have thirty seconds to make up your mind before I open this. Once I do, trust me, it'll be too late."

I sense Romanov tense up behind me and it makes me fucking snap, the situation he's put us all in.

It's then that I decide I've had enough.

All my muscles clenching, I lift my hands up and I slam my palms together, making my tattoos glow and the walls all around us start to make a deafening noise as I work on releasing the stone from within.

With a loud and sudden groaning sound, a bunch of rocks fly out and come to hover around Ricky. "This is your last chance. Let go of the fucking Box, *now*."

But instead of listening, he just smiles and starts opening it.

The next thing I know, he's grimacing, his hand flying to wrap itself around his throat. He grabs the Box tighter with his other hand.

I don't have to even glance at her, I know it's Romanov using her Blood Magic on him.

“You really should listen to him,” I hear her tell him in a voice that sends shivers down my spine.

But instead of doing as she says, Ricky smiles with a cough and starts trying to use the one hand to open the Box.

At that, she makes his entire body fly up, slamming into the ceiling with a sickening sound.

He lets out a strangling sound and I guess it makes her fear she’ll kill him, because the next thing I know, he’s snatching his hand away from his throat and opening the Box.

For a second, my mind goes blank.

Then I send all the rocks slamming into him, but he’s already crashing to the ground, the Judge figurine flying out of the Box and coming to hover above us.

Before there’s a flash of light that nearly blinds me, and when I manage to open my eyes again, what I see almost makes me double back.

*

It’s a… woman, I guess, I think as we all freeze in place, my eyes dragging up and down the enormous figure floating in the air, seemingly composed of twigs and clay and leaves, even bugs.

I watch her eyes land on Ricky’s creature. Her lips curl in disgust and the next thing I know, it disappears.

And then she lets her narrowed eyes sweep over the three of us, making me hold my breath.

“Yes?” her deep, ethereal voice sounds. Annoyance, there’s a touch of annoyance in it.

But what makes me really worried is the sheer power emanating from her with no ups and downs. Constant, tremendous power.

“Dame Gothel herself?” I hear Ricky say in a choked-up voice. I turn to look at him, finding him staring up at her in awe. “I can’t believe this is how it works.”

Dame Gothel just takes a deep breath, as if she has to fight not to lose her patience. Fuck, I think as I throw a glance at Romanov, who’s still standing there, unharmed, her eyes narrowed at the woman.

“Um,” Ricky starts, a bit of hesitation in his voice, “it’s the biggest honor of my life to find myself in your presence. My name is Eryndor O’Connor, of the famed and ancient line—”

“Get to the point,” Dame Gothel cuts him off.

“It’s justice I seek, Dame Gothel,” he continues in a more fervent voice. “For you to even the scales between Grimm and Fiain Academies, the ones you helped bring into existence and the ones you’ve sworn to keep under your wing.”

“The scales have already been evened,” she says with an impatient wave of her hand, “a hundred and fifty six years ago.”

“That’s not true,” Ricky protests. “The Grimms *want* you to think that, sure—”

Like a gust of air, she flies to get in his face, her voice turning menacing as she says, “Oh they *want* me to think that? And that’s what you think of *me*? That I have to rely on the words of you pitiful creatures for the truth of what happened here?”

I see Ricky swallow around a lump in his throat. “Of course not.”

And he pauses a little, at least until she retreats. Then he continues, seemingly struggling to keep looking at her. “But there must be some kind of mistake here. My namesake was a great king, one who did all he could to bring his land prosperity. But he did make one grave mistake — trusting the Grimms. During the Games of 1867, he realized they were rigging the Games and he tried to set the record straight.”

“Actually,” I hear Romanov say as she takes a step closer, making my muscles tense up, “it was the other way around.”

Both me and Ricky turn to look at her.

“How would *you* know?” Ricky demands. “I have his diaries.”

She folds her arms. “And I have Vasilisa Romanov’s portrait.”

What is she talking about, I think to myself as I watch Ricky frown, but she’s already letting out a scoff.

“What?” she asks him. “None of his journal entries mention *my* ancestor? The one he trapped in a painting?”

Ricky grits his teeth and proceeds to ignore her, turning to Dame Gothel instead. “My great-great-grandfather tried to set the record straight,” he tells her, “but the Grimms waged war against him, damaging our Academy’s Heart’s magic in the process and causing the downfall of the O’Connor dynasty.”

He pauses to spit out, “So how can you think, even for a second, that the scales have already been evened?”

Dame Gothel lets out a little laugh as she turns to look at Romanov with this funny look in her eyes that makes me hold my breath.

“Because the girl is right,” she says, her eyes lingering on her for a moment longer.

Then she turns back to Ricky, making me breathe a sigh of relief. “Your ancestor… He didn’t try to set the record straight. He tried to use the Box to steal Grimm Academy’s Heart’s magic. So to punish him, I damaged *his* Academy’s Heart’s magic.”

What the…

For a second, there’s silence. Then Ricky expels an angry breath, his hands balling into fists. “*You* did it?” he demands.

“I did,” she tells him, sounding downright bored.

“You’re the one to blame for all this?” he insists.

And I notice the temperature in the room dropping as Dame Gothel shoots him this cold, cold look.

I don’t hesitate. I jump in between the two of them and I lock eyes with Ricky. “It doesn’t matter,” I tell him. “It’s in the past, Ricky. How can’t you see?” I throw my hands up in the air, becoming desperate to finally get us all out of this fucking situation as I feel Dame Gothel’s eyes on me. “We need to be moving forward, doing everything we can to build a better future, not letting ourselves get stuck in the past. Just let it go, please.”

He glances away, his jaw clenching.

But I don’t give up. I take a step closer. “Just let it go and all will be forgiven.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but then I feel this raw energy draw closer and my head snaps back to see Dame Gothel looking down at us. At *me*. And it feels as if she can see through all my walls, straight at the fox huddled inside.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she says without taking her eyes off me. “It seems the situation *does* require me to even the scales after all.”

My heart skips a beat, fear flooding me.

She turns her eyes back onto Ricky, motioning at me as she says, “But it’s because of *him* that it does.”

The next thing I know, light starts to break through her, seeming to explode and making me have to shield my eyes before it dies down, leaving her hovering there like a second ago, as if nothing happened.

“There, young alpha,” she tells me, “I’ve fixed your Academy’s Heart’s magic.”

I just blink at her, too dumbfounded to say anything.

“What about Grimm Academy?” I hear Ricky demand.

“Grimm Academy stays the way it is,” she tells him, right before she starts disappearing. “Except for one painting,” she adds as she throws Romanov this funny little look, making her frown.

Then she turns her focus back onto Ricky. “And I’m not giving you any more of my time. I suggest you listen to your alpha, little hyena.”

“No,” Ricky shouts. And he lunges at her, lifting his hands to throw punches at the air. “Hey, come back here.”

The next thing I know, she’s no longer there, she’s *everywhere.* In the walls, underneath the floor, in the air itself. And there’s this unearthly roar coming from all around me, so loud and so pervasive, it shakes me to the core, making me stumble back and fall to the ground, along with Romanov and Ricky.

Before it all just goes away. Because she’s made her point.

It takes me a moment to come to. When I do, I find Romanov jumping to her feet and Ricky dragging his body to where the Box is lying.

“Ricky,” I shout at him as I watch his hand dart to it, and I move to stop him, but then I hear Romanov’s knife whiz past my ear. She must’ve used up most of her Blood Magic by now.

But the next thing I know, I’m stopping midstep because the knife has Ricky’s hand pinned to the floor, and he’s letting out a pained groan, his face twisting in anguish.

He doesn’t look up. Through gritted teeth, he says, “She can’t do that.”

For a second, I think he’s talking about Romanov. But then he spits out, “She was supposed to burn this goddamn place to the ground.”

And without a moment of hesitation, he pulls the knife out of his hand and pushes himself up from the floor.

The knife squirms in his hand, but he’s not letting her use her magic to get it back.

Disgust making my jaw clench, I spit out, “I thought it was restoring our Academy to its former glory that you wanted. You know, *justice*, not revenge. Huh, Ricky?”

“Oh I’ll be getting both,” he tells me as he throws me a weird smile, “don’t you worry.”

Blood curdles in my veins even before he makes a sudden move to my right, swinging his arm back as he lunges at her with her own knife.

I hear her let out a groan and I see the knife finally release itself from Ricky's grip and fly back to her, slicing his palm so badly, it makes blood spurt out.

But I'm already slamming him into the wall, my entire body burning up with rage. "Don't you dare," I snarl at him, "not if you don't want me to rip your fucking throat out."

For a second, he just lets me choke him. Then he gives me a smile, making my eyebrows pull down, and the next thing I know, he's taking something out of his pocket and throwing it into the air behind me.

There's this explosion, just like the ones I remember from the First Game, and all my muscles stiffen even before I hear a scream and my head snaps back to see the impact sending her flying back.

And for a second, it feels as if my mind has shut down, permanently.

Then fear floods me and I let go of Ricky, only to sense him shift behind my back and see his hyena charging at her.

Fear and rage consume me and I let my fox out despite the confines of the hallway and I don't waste a split second in leaping after him. Before he can get to her, I open my mouth and I snap my teeth shut around his neck, lifting him up into the air like a rag doll just as my paws land on the floor.

And I shake him, growling, until I feel his blood fill my mouth and his body go limp in it.

I drop him to the floor and I come to hover over her, scanning her frantically. She has these burns all over her body, but what's making panic and desperation flood me is the gaping hole in her stomach and the delirious look in her eyes.

"I don't want your help," she squeezes out as she lets her head fall to the side.

Forcing myself to snap out of it, I shift back and I rush to lift her up, as quickly and gently as possible, all the while shoving all my raging emotions aside.

"Get away from me," I hear her mutter as I start running out of the hallway.

And her words, they hurt so much more than that look I thought hurt more than anything else before.

But right now, I can't let myself think about anything other than getting help. Because she *won't* die. Even if it meant me having to die instead.

*

I find myself waiting in front of her door, unable to do anything but keep trying to gauge what's going behind it. There are so many people around me, occupying the couches, armchairs and plain chairs of the common space of her floor in House of Lilith.

But I barely register any of them, my forearms resting on my knees, my head hung low and my eyes fixed on the floor before me. And it's not because my entire body is in pain or because my head is swimming like never before in my life. It's because it feels as if I'd just started waking from the worst nightmare of my life only to get flung into something much, much worse.

It shakes me out of my haze, when I see a tall, proud woman enter the common space and march straight up to her door.

And the woman is taller than Nyx, much colder and more uptight, but for some reason, as I watch her get in the room and close the door behind her, I know it's her mother I'm looking at.

It makes me fume, knowing it's only now she's come to visit. I haven't left Nyx's side since it happened, for the last four hours at least, and I know the woman has a son they're currently keeping in the dungeon, but her daughter is here in mortal danger and she's only now deigning to show her fucking face.

I have to fight the urge to go over there and strangle her with my own two hands. And sure, at least Hilde has shown some sense of devotion and loyalty, not letting that fucking Aalders past the staircase into the common space, let alone her room.

But right now, I hate them all, I hate them all with a burning passion for having the right to be there with her, while I have to stay out here, wondering if she's even going to make it as her words keep echoing in my head. *Get away from me.*

I let my head hang low again, the flood of rage making way for desperation once again, leaving me even more bone-tired and numb than I was a moment ago.

My fault, it's all my fault and no one else's, I think with bitterness in my mouth. How long have I had feelings for her? How long had she been single before she went back to him? And how have I behaved this past month?

I have to fight not to get up and start smashing the place up. Despicable — using those two girls to make her jealous and tossing them aside as soon

as she was no longer there, letting my fox's anger come pouring out of me, taking it out on everyone around me…

But worst of all, I've had so many chances to tell her how I feel, before it all turned to shit like this. To tell her that she's the one for me and that I only wish to be with her.

It's at that exact moment that I sense my fox stir within me again. And I let all my sadness rush to the surface as I turn my focus onto him.

I see him lying in the deepest corner of my mind, his front paws tucked under his chin, looking barely alive. And it makes this memory flood me — strangely vivid — of the thirteen-year-old me in the woods, awakening my animal for the very first time.

Boy, the strange, terrifying fox called me.

And it made me so pissed, I balled my hands into fists, spitting out, "My name is *Dahrian* and that's what you'll call me."

I remember it all so clearly. There was a moment of silence before I heard that mocking, playful laugh of his. *I've been around for longer than you'd be able to comprehend. I've gone through more bodies such as yours than I can even count. And once you shrivel up and die, I'll still be here, growing more powerful by the day.*

He paused before he let out this chuckle. *So until you earn my respect, I'll call you whatever the fuck I want,* boy.

I thought I did, I think to myself as disgust twists my face, my teeth gritting. But I never did, didn't I? I still deserve to be called 'boy' and nothing else.

I see his ears prick up even before I hear him say, *I'm not letting this slide so easily…*

And it sends a flood of relief coursing through me, just hearing his voice, however exhausted and hopeless.

But you only needed to stop running from it to make me able to come back to you. And you've just done it. There's a moment of silence before he says, *Dahrian*.

"Thank you," I tell him, simply yet earnestly.

And I know it should make me happy, but it's not exactly a joyful reunion. I may have started repairing my relationship with him, but that only makes the two of us — waiting in front of her door, fearing the worst as we slowly lose our minds.

And now that I’m finally waking up, only one thing seems to be certain. If she dies, I’m as good as dead myself.

Chapter 33 - Nyx

It's a beautiful summer day outside, when it should be a gloomy, stormy one, I think as I gaze, numbly, through the window from my bed, bombarded with images of Ricky's hyena lunging at me, Nikolay's terrified face, the look in Howe's eyes when he rushed over to me.

Twenty four hours, it's been only twenty four hours since it all happened. Just yesterday, I thought I'd be home by now, putting this entire school year out of my head.

And there's this terrifying unease in me that's worse than the memories of the pain after that thing exploded in my face and the hyena attacked me. It flares up every time my mind tries to feel out the future. Because the future seems to have been destroyed.

Nikolay is about to be locked up. Fiains are about to leave for good. Vasilisa is about to force me to burn her or something. And Max…

I glance at my hand, where the ring used to be… This morning I happened to find out he lost all that money he said he bet on me winning. Turns out he actually bet on himself.

That led me to learning it was *him* who spread all those rumors about me after we broke up. And now… Now it feels as if it was all a lie, all along, from the moment Nikolay introduced me to him three years ago to the moment I broke up with him yesterday.

And now the silence in my room is only broken by the sounds of his once again incessant calling and texting.

Except when it's a call or text from *Howe*, coming from a number no longer saved.

"Hope you're feeling better. And I know it must be hard for you right now, but I'd really appreciate it if you'd let me pay you a visit."

"Just five minutes of your time, that's all I ask."

"Or a reply at least."

I know them all by heart, that's how much I've stared at them. But I ignore them all.

I won't let him ruin it, I think with unwavering determination. It took all I had, to part with him the way I did yesterday. I thought he deserved at least as much after the way he behaved after the Game. And back in that hallway with Ricky, he only proved he did.

But thinking I'd *be* with him? It makes me let out a scoff. I don't even *know* him. And he may think he wants me *now*, but I've seen exactly how quickly he can discard me and go back to sleeping around. And even if *that* weren't the case, I mean…

Bitterness floods my mouth as soon as I recall it.

He's already told me exactly what he thinks of me. And whatever I end up doing with my fucking life, it sure as hell won't involve being with anyone who feels I'm a lot, which is exactly why I was so determined when I told him to leave me the fuck alone.

It's just that I thought he'd respect it.

And I don't know why he's being so persistent in doing the fucking opposite, especially considering the fact they're practically already on their way back home, at least according to Mother's latest from this morning, the news that the Fiains would be leaving at five PM.

But his reasons don't matter. There's nothing more to be said, so I'm refusing to be forced into going through yet another goodbye. Which is why the only thing that makes sense right now is making sure I never see him again. So I'll just stay here, in my bed, until well after five, and then I'll leave myself.

And I can barely feel the gratitude for having survived and already feeling, physically at least, as if nothing ever happened. Because I'm in for the worst summer ever, a summer of heartbreak on all fronts.

But maybe it's for the best, I conclude as my eyes land on my desk, in which I'm hiding the plans I devised after my last visit to Vasilisa. I have work to do, and as she herself said…

Love is only an urge that's best overcome, isn't it?

It's at that exact moment that I hear a soft knock at the door, and I smell Hilde standing on the other side.

Hilde, the only constant in all of this, I think to myself with a sad smile. Hilde, who I can barely look in the eye without shame threatening to swallow me whole. Apologize, I need to apologize to her, as soon as this is over.

"Come in," I say.

And she does. "Hi, Nyx," she says a little tentatively. "You're looking good as new." She comes to stand in front of my bed. "Is there anything I can bring you or help you with?"

"No, thank you, Hilde," I reply as I glance at the clock above the mantelpiece opposite me, seeing it's ten to five already. I turn my eyes back onto her. "Do you think you could come back a little later?"

She just looks at me for a second, then comes to sit on my bed with this serious look on her face.

Fuck.

"I know you probably won't want to talk about this," she starts in a somber voice, "but I'm just going to come out and say it."

"Can we do it later?" I plead. "Complete with my apology to you and everything. Just a bit later, please, Hilde."

She looks deeper into my eyes, making me frown. "Look, Nyx, I *know*," she finally says.

"What?"

"I know what happened before the Fourth Game," she replies, making me push myself up in my bed, my ears burning and my frown growing deeper. "See, I said *before*, so you should know I'm telling the truth."

Why won't anyone let it be, I think with gritted teeth. Why can't they see *I just want to forget*?

"Well," I spit out, bitterness flooding my mouth, "I'm so happy for you, Hilde, that you finally got yourself that piece of hot goss you wanted so much."

For a second, she just frowns at me. "You think I came here to judge you? Is *that* why you never told me anything?"

“How did you find out?” I demand.

She shrugs, albeit a little hesitantly. “I may have done something I’m not particularly proud of.”

Max. She used her Mind Magic on Max.

“I was worried about you, Nyx,” she insists. “*Seriously* worried. And you weren’t telling me anything.”

So she went and found out about me getting ‘railed in a filthy classroom’, as Max put it.

“And you thought you had the right to snoop?” I demand. “Huh?”

Of course, it’s me, myself and I that I’m actually mad at, for having been that person myself not too long ago.

“Yes,” Hilde insists. “I’m not exactly proud, but things got enough out of hand for me to decide that, yes, I do.”

I shake my head at her. “Hilde,” I say in an exasperated near whisper. “I used Blood Magic on you and I threatened to cut off your fingers.”

“You did, yeah,” she says flatly. “*And*? What, you were planning on actually doing it? Please.” This last word she drawls mockingly.

“No, but seriously,” I insist. “Why are you wasting even a smidge of your energy on me?” I feel myself start to get emotional. “Can’t you see I’m not someone you should care about?”

There’s a second of silence before she asks, “How long have we known each other, Nyx?”

I let out a frustrated breath. “Since we were ten.”

“And I was always a little scared of you and I thought you were a bit of a bitch. At least you *were* to *me*. Still, for as long as I can remember, there was something about you that made it impossible for me not to like you. Like, one good word out of your mouth has always felt more important than a thousand from others.”

I roll my eyes at her. It doesn’t deter her.

“But now…” She pauses to squint at me. “With everything I know, I feel I can finally start to *understand* you, too.”

“Oh really?” I drawl.

“Yes, and let’s just say, that little stunt you pulled the other day,” she says scoldingly, “it made me stop being scared of you altogether.” Then she turns serious again. “And I thought I could see it, but now I know for sure. You’re *hurting*, and I came to tell you I’m here for you, if you want me to be.”

“This is nothing,” I snap and I tear my eyes away from her, fighting not to show emotion.

“Please,” she replies sarcastically. “You’re pining.”

I push myself up a little, throwing daggers at her. “What did you just say to me?”

“Fine,” she says, raising her hands in defense, “no need to bring out the f-ing knife. *But…*”

“Yes?” I ask, wanting her to finally spit it out so I can get her the fuck out of here.

She hesitates for a second. “I just have to tell you I really, *really* think you should answer his texts.”

That makes my eyebrows pull down. Did Mother put her up to this? Trying to save my engagement?

“I would’ve come back anyway,” she starts, “but, um, Howe…”

Howe? And I can’t help but notice it’s the first time she’s referred to him by his last name, and so flatly at that.

“What about him?” I demand in a breathless voice.

“He paid me a visit just now,” she replies hesitantly. “Told me he’s been texting, calling, coming knocking all day, with no success. Basically, he asked me to try to convince you to see him.”

There’s a moment of silence before I turn my eyes away from her. “I’ve already said goodbye to Howe,” I say in the flattest voice I can muster. “Not planning on doing it again.”

“He seemed really desperate to talk to you.”

“Well, he has a way of making things *seem*…”

For a second, she just squints at me. “How long has this been going on, Nyx?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I snap. “It’s over now.”

But right now, it’s five PM and I can hear the commotion outside and I hate it that Hilde’s here to see my shame, but I still get up and walk up to the window.

I have to see him leave. Maybe if I see him leave, with my own two eyes, my heart will just give up on this whole bullshit.

And there they are, the remaining Fiains, being escorted by the Pied Piper, almost all the professors and a whole bunch of students, all moving across the gardens and straight for the nearest Pull Chamber.

I grit my teeth when I spot him among them.

“I just think you’ll regret it if you just let him leave,” I hear Hilde say as she comes to stand beside me. “But of course, it’s all up to you.”

I don’t say anything, all my focus on making sure I witness him get zapped the fuck out of here.

I see him wait for his pack to use the Pull in groups of five.

But once they all do, including the newly released Archon, instead of using it himself, he turns on his heel and starts marching back.

I frown, bitterly wondering how much longer I’ll have to wait for this to be fucking over.

My frown only growing deeper, I watch him walk all the way to Lilith Tower, stop once he’s right in front, and then start climbing.

What the…

“I guess that’s my cue,” I hear Hilde say.

And for a second, I can’t tear my eyes away from the figure deftly making its way up the tower and straight for my window.

But then I turn to Hilde and tell her, in this small voice, “You don’t have to go.”

“Oh I think I do,” she says with a smile.

I just blink at her.

She lets out a little laugh. “If I don’t see you before I leave…”

“No, you will,” I rush to say, but she’s already walking out of my room and I’m moving away from the window so as not to be seen from the outside.

But the next thing I know, there are three sharp knocks sending my heart racing.

*

“Romanov,” I hear his voice boom when I don’t answer, serious and commanding.

There’s a moment of silence before he gives the window three more quick knocks, more impatient this time. “Hey, open up.”

I take a deep breath and I come to stand in front of the window, seeing him gripping the gargoyle on the window frame with one hand and pushing into the tower wall with his feet to keep himself hanging there, staring at me with this intense look on his face.

“We’ve already said our goodbyes, Howe,” I say flatly. “Let’s not ruin it.”

“It’s no joke, you know,” he says with a frown, “how long I can stay like this.”

“You can die like that for all I care,” I snap and I walk away from the window.

“Don’t mind if I do then,” I hear him snap back as I start pacing my room, making sure I’m out of his line of sight.

And I try to ignore it, that he’s there, but then he starts whistling, the sound somehow pissed, and he keeps doing it, louder and louder, until I march up to the window, open it and take an angry step back as I watch him jump through.

“Five minutes, you said?” I ask as soon as his boots land on my carpeted floor.

He stands straight, throwing me a squint. “So you *did* get my messages?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I say flatly. “I seem to have lost your number.”

For a second, there’s silence. Then he just says, “Fair enough.”

And proceeds scanning my body, as if checking the state of me, saying in a softer voice, “You look… all healed up.”

It instantly makes me pissed, that he’d go ahead and make it seem like he gives a shit.

So I march up to my commode, grab an hourglass I’ve never used as, well, an hourglass, and I flip it over, slamming it back onto the polished wooden surface.

And I turn back to him, folding my arms and motioning at the sand starting to run out as I watch his eyebrows shoot up.

“Right,” he says as he shifts on his feet a little, folding his arms as well. “Well, here goes.”

And he takes a deep breath and he says, “You’ll probably say it’s a real dick move, what I’m about to do.”

It makes me quirk an eyebrow.

“Hell, until yesterday,” he continues, “I’d say the same. After all, you did tell me you never wanted to hear another word about this. And it was my sincere intention to respect that.”

He runs a hand over his face and drops his arms to his sides, locking eyes with me again. “But then, yesterday, you almost died, and I found myself in a situation where I wasn’t even allowed to see you. And it made me realize I don’t really give a fuck what you’ll think of my little dick move.”

“Get to the point.”

“Right,” he says, his jaw clenching a little. “So here’s how this will go. You’re going to agree to be with me. I’m not leaving until you do.”

And he just keeps standing there, folding his arms again with sheer determination on his face.

It all makes me let out a bitter laugh. “Please tell me you’re on something.”

“I’ve never been more sober or serious in my life,” he replies, still in that super somber voice. “But I get where you’re coming from. I mean, my behavior this past month…” He pauses to glance away for a second, gritting his teeth. “It was despicable and inexcusable to say the least, and I do understand that it makes you not want to have anything to do with me right now.”

And he takes a step closer, his voice growing softer and more rushed as he says, “But if you only let me, I’d show you how desperately sorry I am, I’d make you see it pains me to even think about it, and I’d prove to you that nothing like that would ever happen again.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” I say with a shake of my head. I fail to stop bitterness from coming through when I say, “I know you never liked Max, but at least *him* I knew.”

To my surprise, he doesn’t protest. “No no, I totally understand,” he says matter-of-factly. “But I already have a solution for that.”

My eyes narrow, he catches that and he looks deeper into them, taking a step closer and pointing a finger at the ground. “Right now, you’re going to start asking me all those questions you want to ask me and I’m going to answer them all as truthfully as possible. If it’s something I’m lying to *myself* about, I’ll put it aside until I give you the truth and then go back to my lie.” He pushes his chest out a little and adds, “And I realize this might take a while, so I already have everything worked out in case they throw us out of the Academy before you’re done with me.”

“Thought you said you only needed five minutes.”

“Well,” he says with a shrug, “five minutes for the pitch.”

“Here’s your answer then. Not a chance in hell.” And I move to open the door for him, so he can get the fuck out.

“Why the hell not?” he asks as he comes to block my way.

And he’s standing so close, not letting me look away, saying in a low growl, “Tell me so I can fix it.”

“Remember telling me you thought this thing between us is a princess’s temper tantrum?” I find myself asking, starting to fume. “Well, it seems it’s become a *player’s* temper tantrum,” I say with a bitter scoff. I angrily wave

a hand. “You can’t let us part as, well, *not* enemies, because you just can’t take no for an answer, can you? You can’t leave knowing there’s a girl here who’s not still swooning. It’d hurt your pride too much or whatever.”

“You think I’ve never gotten rejected?” he asks as he gets in my face, making me take a step back and turn my eyes away from him. “I take my rejections from girls the way I take *all* my rejections. I say thanks anyway, have yourself a lovely day. I’m a grown man, not a fucking child.”

There’s a moment of silence before he says, “Hey, look at me.”

And I don’t plan on doing it, but I do, finding him staring at me. “You saying no to me is *not* the reason I’m here. I’m here because you’re all I can think about, because nothing matters more than what you think of me, because I’m desperately in love with you. So,” he says as he lets out an angry breath, “anything else I can fix before you start asking the fucking questions already?”

For a second, I just stare at him. “Fine,” I say, making him raise his eyebrows.

And I ask the first thing that comes to mind. “Where did you go when you disappeared for two weeks?”

Chapter 34 - Dahrian

It makes at least *some* of all this built-up fucking tension dissipate, when she finally says, “Fine,” and gives me my first question.

But I’m far from having anything to celebrate, so I force myself to stay focused, and I go to take a seat on the edge of her bed, her eyes closely following me.

“I told you about gáirs, didn’t I?” I start as soon as I sit down, leaning my forearms on my knees and fixing my eyes on her.

She nods, but she just keeps standing there, her arms folded and her eyes narrowed.

But I just let the truth pour out of me, embarrassment and all the other fucking emotions be damned.

“Well,” I start, “where I come from, we also have amadáns.” It makes me pleased when I see I have her attention. “Hooligans who gather in gangs and pretend they’re Robin Hoods. My brother Sean is one of them. He’s fifteen, the youngest, and there’s a lot of hatred in him, hatred he can’t seem to get under control, so when he loses it…”

I shake my head and let out a sigh. “Serious shit happens. So every once in a while, I have to go running to stop him and I never know what I’m in for or how long it’ll take me. And I can’t even count how many times this has happened, but if you want, I can tell you all about his individual rampages or anything else in however much detail you want.”

“What about *you*?” she asks, the touch of disapproval in her voice making a knife twist in my stomach. “What about *your* anger? What about that time I saw you in the cafeteria, making that guy beg you not to hurt him? Is *that* how you normally behave, when you’re not putting on an act?”

And it hurts, what she’s asking me, but right now, I’m more grateful to be getting another question. So I grit my teeth and I say with a bitter smile, “You’ve had the pleasure of meeting my fox, haven't you?”

There’s a flash of something in her eyes, but I don’t let it deter me. “Well, he’s a powerful animal, and the more power they have, the harder it is to keep them under control. I’ve always taken it very seriously, though. And I *did* have it under control, until *you* came along and suddenly, all he wanted to do was run around trying to take a whiff of you,” I say with a bitter little laugh.

She rolls her eyes as if she doesn’t believe me and I force myself to turn serious again. “But it wasn’t an actual problem, until you invited me to your room.”

Now that makes both her skin flush with embarrassment and her ears prick up with interest.

“After *that* night, well…” I shake my head. “I went overboard trying to deny my feelings for you, in doing so I damaged my relationship with my fox, and we both went off the rails. And I’m still working on it…”

I pause to look deeper into her eyes. “But it’s the first time it's ever happened like that and it *will* be the last.”

She lets out a scoff. “What about the time your ex cheated on you?”

“No,” I say with a frown and a determined shake of my head. “I was hurt, of course. I did care about Aisling. And she did do it with my then best friend, which only made it hurt more. But my fox and I, there was nothing more than a week-long fallout between us after that. Nothing even remotely like this.”

This time, once I’m done talking, she stays silent, making me fear I haven’t really answered the question.

I get up and I see her shake her head and take a step back, but I’m not giving up.

“You’ve got to understand, Nyx,” I plead as I come to stand in front of her, “my ex is not some cartoon villain. She’s a well-meaning girl, one I pushed away by refusing to get serious about stuff. Something I wasn’t willing to do with her, but *want* to do with *you*.”

I pause before I say, guessing *this* might be the thing she really wants to know, “So if you’re asking if I’m still hung up on her, she’s nothing more than a fading memory of what was never even meant to be.”

And I get a little ahead of myself and I try to take her in my arms, only for her to shoot me a nasty look.

“If you’re so in love with me,” she demands as she squints at me, “how come the only two times I saw you after the Fourth Game, you had your nose up some other girl’s skirt?”

“I was trying to get a reaction out of you,” I say in a fervent voice, shaking my head and waving my hands around in frustrated helplessness, “that’s all that was.”

She frowns at me and I understand I might not be taking this conversation slow enough, but she’s single again and she did let me in and it’s all making me feel an overwhelming impatience.

I take a step closer, leaning a little to say in a low, rushed voice, my excitement growing when I see she’s not pulling away, “Come on, Nyx. I’ve been desperate for your attention since the moment you first looked into my eyes, and that’s something you’ve known for quite some time, maybe even from the very beginning. If you hadn’t, you wouldn’t have acted the way you did.”

She takes a step back, frowning. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says.

And it does seem honest, but it still makes me let out a laugh, saying, “Don’t play dumb.”

That earns me a nasty little look, but I don’t care. I take a step closer and she takes one back, now refusing to look at me. “When you invited me up here, before the Fourth Game,” I say, dropping my voice and trying to catch her eye, “to seduce me into answering your questions, you want to say you *didn’t* already feel you had me wrapped around your finger?”

I do another step closer and she does another step back, still refusing to look at me.

“Want to go further back?” I insist, my voice even lower but more fervent. “When you slinked into the Elevator with me, the night of the Ball, to make your little proposal, you want to say you *didn’t* know I wouldn’t be able to say no to you? Huh? Right after I almost got into a full-blown fight with fucking Aalders because of you?” I let out a rough little laugh. “Come on.”

Finally, she locks eyes with me. And for a second, she stays silent, before she frowns and says, pensively and with a touch of defiance, “I’m not playing dumb. It’s just…”

I hold my breath.

“I guess sometimes it’s hard to see the difference between what you *want* and what *is*.”

It makes my heart beat faster, the implication that this might be something she actually *does* want.

But then she just folds her arms again, gritting her teeth. For some unknown goddamn reason, I think to myself, she still doesn’t seem to believe me when I say it’s what *I* want.

“Look,” I start, “I haven’t even thought about anyone else in a very long time now, since the First Game.” My voice grows rough with longing when I lean in a little to say, “Because there’s this little vixen that just won’t stay out of my head, making my blood rush around whenever I lay my eyes on her.”

She looks up at me and there’s something in her eyes that’s telling me I might be getting through to her.

So I dare to say, taking a step back and raising my voice a little, “If you really don’t want to be with me, fine. I’ll get out of your hair.” I pause for a second, turning more serious than I’ve ever been as I reach into my pocket to take her ribbon out, making her look at it before I lock eyes with her again. “But if you’re walking away from this, you’re doing it *knowing*, without a shadow of doubt, that there’s no one else for me anymore, that you’re everything I’ve ever wanted and more.”

There’s a moment of silence before she drops her arms to her sides. “Okay,” she says, “even if I believed you, your saying you want me, what do you want *from* me?”

It makes hope burst into a flame inside me. “*Everything*,” I come to whisper in her ear, my heart starting to pound when she doesn’t pull away. “I wanted you so badly,” I start in a low, rushed voice, wrapping my fingers gently around her wrist and pulling her a little closer to me, “I was prepared to go along with any charade you made me go along with. But I don't want to have to do that anymore.”

And she stiffens a little, but she’s still not pulling away and I just keep whispering in her ear, my voice turning into a low growl, “I want to be able to see you when I fucking *want* to see you, I want to know you're thinking

about me when we're not together, I want to make love to you, slowly, in a bed, *our* bed."

My grip on her wrist tightens and still, she doesn't pull away. "And sure," I keep going with passion in my voice, "you've only known the player me, but if we do this, I don't want to share, with anyone, *ever*, not physically and not emotionally. I'm *yours*, body and soul, and I want the same from you."

For a second, there's silence. Then she pulls away, and, to my surprise, I find tears in her eyes.

"No," she snaps in an angry, choked-up voice, making my eyebrows pull down. "And you want to know why? Because this is what you *do*, you asshole."

It leaves me a little dumbfounded, her choice of words. But before I can ask what the hell she's talking about, she takes another step back, throwing daggers at me as she says with bitterness in her voice, "You make me feel all special, like you wouldn't change a thing about me, and then you go and tell me I'm a lot."

What the…

"Remember that?" she drawls angrily, tears still in her eyes. And then she almost makes me laugh by seemingly trying to imitate my voice. "'You're *a lot*. And you're like that *all the fucking time*. It's exactly the kind of thing I try to avoid.'"

Then she gets in my face, jabbing her finger into her temple, "They're here, *burned* into my brain, those words. You *asshole*."

So that's what this is all about, I think to myself. And it hurts, it hurts like hell, to see her in pain like that, but at the same time… It makes me so fucking happy.

Without another moment of hesitation, I grab her by the waist, I tighten my grip when she tries to fight me off, and I bury my face in her hair, whispering, "I was hurting, love. You were making me feel things and want things I'd never felt or wanted before, which got me scared as hell. Then I saw you with that fucking Aalders and I lost it."

Feeling her relax in my arms, I let the emotions come pouring out as I keep talking into her ear, "I fucking lost it. And I wanted you to tell me it's *me* you want, not him, but I wasn't going to ask. Instead, I tried to get a reaction out of you in the most childish, pathetic way possible. To make you tell me how *you* feel without saying anything first. I'm so sorry, love."

And with that, I force myself to take a step back, her somber, teary eyes remaining on me as I work on steadying my breathing so I can show her exactly how determined I am.

"But I'm done with that shit now," I say. "So, yes, I *do* think you're a lot, all the fucking time." And that earns me this look, but I just keep going. "But if you let me, I'm going to show you exactly how big of a compliment that is. It's one of the things I love most about you and I wouldn't want it any other way."

And I just keep standing there, waiting for her reaction with bated breath.

It makes me breathe a sigh of relief when I see her eyes soften and her muscles relax.

The next thing I know, she's getting on her toes and throwing her arms around my shoulders. Eagerly, I wrap mine around her waist and pull her to myself.

And I feel myself nudged to lower my head a little, my heart throbbing in anticipation.

"You want to know," she leans to whisper in my ear, making me hold my breath, "whether I think about you when we're not together."

A shiver runs down my spine even before she says, her voice low, soft and longing, "I think about you all the time. When I'm alone and when I'm with others, when I wake up in the morning and when I go to bed at night."

For a second, the words make my mind go blank. Then they send an avalanche of pleasure crashing over me and I find myself grabbing her ass to lift her up, growling into her ear, "Oh fuck, Nyx, you don't know how good it feels to hear that."

And my lips find hers and we kiss, deeply and passionately, as I start trying to tear the clothes off her.

She stops me, wrapping her legs tighter around me so she can pull away a little. "I missed you, Dahrian," she whispers, my name on her lips making me let out a growl. "It was so painful thinking I didn't matter to you."

I make her look at me. "You don't just matter to me. You're *everything* to me."

And I go to lay her on her bed, I take her shirt off and I come to hover over her, kissing her all over as I whisper all the things I wasn't able to say until now, her breathing turning more ragged and her grip on my back tighter with every thing I say. How beautiful she is. How I fucking love her

lips, her breasts, her ass, her legs. How they drive me crazy, her voice and the way she moves.

Barely containing myself, I lower my head to take a bite out of her belly and I pull her boxers off her, making her suck in a breath and my dick start throbbing under my pants. And I get on the floor before her, putting my head between her legs and her legs on my shoulders. And I start to kiss, lick, and tease all over, her moaning filling my ears and making me desperate for more.

She grabs a fistful of my hair and tries to pull me up, but I just look up at her, shooting her a serious look as I say, my voice low and rough, “I don’t think you understand what’s going on right now.”

She frowns.

“You won’t be giving me fifteen minutes for a quick fuck and a little chat afterwards.” I pause to make it sink in. “You’ll be spending the night with me. So right now, do you know what I want you to do?”

“What?” she asks in a breathless voice.

“I want you to come for me, love,” I whisper to her, “so I can make you come again.”

And I see her eyes glaze over and her breathing turn even heavier, but to my surprise, she doesn’t lay back.

She pushes herself up a little and starts crawling backwards, slowly, as she keeps her eyes locked with me and her legs spread. I get on the bed with her, the thrill of the anticipation making me hold my breath as I crawl after her.

As soon as her head touches the pillow, my nostrils flaring and my breathing ragged, I stop and I grab her by the thighs and I start lowering my head between her legs again, only to have her click her tongue at me and take me by the upper arm to pull me closer.

Looking deep into her eyes, I nestle myself between her legs. And I kiss her, the touch of her lips and the strokes of her tongue making my mind go blank.

But then I feel her slide her hand between her legs and I break the kiss, my eyes darting down to see her fingers start to play with her clit. Fuck. My dick starting to throb, I look up at her only to find her already staring at me with this indecipherable look in her eyes.

“Fuck, yes,” I breathe out, “touch yourself for me.”

And I see her bite her lip and the next thing I know, she's using her other hand to get me inside her.

It makes me grit my teeth and curse out loud again, when I feel her pussy close around me and she lets out one of those delicious little moans.

Keeping myself propped up on one arm, I start sliding myself in and out of her, using the other hand to stroke and squeeze her all over, my gaze hungrily darting between her eyes and her fingers playing with her clit.

It doesn't take long for her moaning to grow louder, especially once I up the tempo, but what makes me really lose it is when the hand she has on my back starts grabbing blindly, as if she's starting to lose control of herself.

I've never gotten her this close, I think as my own desperation rises. And I pull myself out of her, making her frown at me, and I grab her by the thighs to drag her closer and put her legs on my shoulders.

And I give each a ravenous little bite, delighting in the sound it makes her produce, before I slide myself back inside her and start thrusting at the same time I start working her clit with my thumb.

Almost instantly, I see her eyes roll back and I hear her mutter, "Oh fuck, Dahrian."

At that, my mind goes blank for a second. Then I let out this low, desperate groan, but I keep slamming myself inside her until I feel her get pushed over the edge with me, my pleasure only intensifying at the sight of her face flushing and the feel of all her muscles tensing up before they finally relax. I get out of her, still hazy and breathless, and I come to lie next to her naked body, taking her in my arms and starting to kiss her all over.

To my surprise, she rolls over so she's in my lap, she puts her palms on my chest and she gently bites her lip, obviously wanting to say something, but hesitating.

"What is it?" I whisper, wrapping my arms around her.

Her eyes dart to my lips before she asks, "Have you ever heard of—"

"Yes," I cut her off as soon as it hits me she's talking about the kiss. I swallow roughly. "And yes, I want it."

Her eyebrows shoot up, but it turns out I wasn't wrong, because the next thing I know, her eyes are glazing over again and I see her draw her fangs out a little to bite herself on the lip, a drop of blood appearing on the delicate skin.

Mesmerized, I let her kiss me, my hands hungrily dragging up and down her body as she presses herself closer to me, her kisses turning more

aggressive. Fucking hell. It makes me so hard, when I finally feel the bite, the taste of my blood mixing with the taste of hers.

I sense her pull away, the flood of pleasure unlike anything I've ever known making me slower to react than I'd usually be.

But the very next moment, I'm grabbing her by the waist and flipping her over, my excitement only growing when the look in her eyes tells me we really will be having a second round.

Chapter 35 - Nyx

It's deliciously dark and warm, where I'm lying, and there's this voice drifting to me that makes me squirm softly, letting out a content sigh. And in the darkness, there's the fox watching over me, so big yet lying curled up like a pup. Where have I seen the fox before, I start wondering, but that only makes me get all jumbled up, my eyebrows pulling down as my eyes start fighting to open.

As soon as they do, I see he's pushed himself up a little and I'm lying nestled into him, one hand on his chest and one leg thrown over him as he keeps me pressed tight with his arm around my back. And it's his voice that's been stirring me from sleep.

"Just get it done, alright?" he says in a near whisper to someone over the phone.

I don't look up, I keep enjoying his smell and the heat radiating off him.

"What's gotten into *you*?" that someone demands, the voice similar to Dahrian's, just more brusque.

And just as I start squirming to signal that I'm awake, he says, "Look, I have someone I'd like for you all to meet."

It makes me smile from ear to ear.

"Oh," comes the reply.

"Gotta go, Colm. Talk to you later."

And he lowers his head to look into my eyes. "Morning, beautiful."

“Morning, love,” I say as I start pushing myself up to give him a kiss, that idiotic smile still on my face.

But the kiss turns into two and then three, until he’s dragging me up and onto his lap with his tongue in my mouth. Images of last night flash through my mind, making me start burning up with the desire for more. I want him to keep making me come like he did before I feel asleep in his arms.

And my hands start moving of their own accord, trying to get rid of his shirt, but he takes my wrists in his hands and pulls away, making me frown in protest. There’s a teasing smile on his face as he says, “I’m not letting you take advantage of me any more than you have, at least not until you tell me about your plans for the summer.”

And he lets go of my wrists, giving my waist a little pinch. I laugh.

“Well,” I say, feeling a little flushed about it, “I was thinking of maybe spending it with *you*.”

“So here’s what I had in mind,” he starts without a second of hesitation, making me blow out a laugh. “You spend a week at my place, meet my brothers…” He pauses to add, “If it wouldn’t be too soon, of course. And then we go wherever you want. Maybe your tundra?”

That makes my eyebrows shoot up. “You’d go there with me?”

He laughs. “Dame Gothel fixed things for my Academy, Nyx. My family is taken care of. I’d *move* there for you, if you wanted.”

“Well,” I start as I get up, making him let out that little grumble that I love so much, “that might actually solve a huge problem for me.”

He gets up to follow me, I take him by the hand and I lead him over to my desk, where I open the drawer to show him the plans I started devising after my last visit to Vasilisa and the night before the Game.

When I look up at him, he’s squinting and smiling at the same time as his eyes scan the maps with pushpins in them and my scribbles on the margins. “Planning a world takeover, I see,” he finally says as he turns to look at me.

“Just my part of the world,” I say with a shrug. Then I light up again. “Here’s what I’m thinking, Dahrian. The solution to all my problems — my family giving me trouble with the land, my rank without marrying a prince dropping too much, my desire being more than running estates…”

He gives my hand a tug. “Come on, edge of my seat here.”

For a second, I just look at him, feeling embarrassed about it. But I decide not to be a little bitch and I say, “Seems I won’t be a princess after all.” Then I pause. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t be a queen.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Fucking hell.”

It encourages me, when I realize his tone is not at all mocking. “Yes, I mean, after all, it’s not like the current nobility haven’t all done the same at some point, simply declared themselves to be kings and princes and dukes.”

“Yes, do that,” he says with this fire in his eyes.

It warms my heart, but I still frown. “I’m not sure that I can. And I’d need support from a lot of people of high rank who’d sooner think of me as a potential wife than a potential ruler.” I let out an awkward laugh. “So far, I have *one* supporter,” I say, thinking of Mrs Onas expressing eternal gratitude to me for finding her husband’s killer. And thinking of Mother’s reaction when I broke up with Max, *again*, I add, “And one person who’s not exactly a fan.”

It’s just at that moment that I hear a knock at my door and my mind immediately rushes to Nikolay.

I let go of Dahrian’s hand and I go over to the door, only to find a courier delivering flowers.

I take them with a smile and a nod, and close the door behind me.

When I turn around, flowers in my hands, I see Dahrian frowning.

But I’m pretty sure this is not from Max. Still, I rip the note off and read, letting my apparently possessive boyfriend come hover over me.

“Congratulations on winning the Game for your Academy, Lady Romanov. I hear you have also indebted us all by helping to stop one madman from ruining many lives. Your generation is lucky to have you, and I cannot wait to see what you set your mind to once you graduate. Yours, General Alaric.”

My mind rushes to Ricky and I look up at Dahrian, who’s still staring at the note, and I ask, “Are you okay?”

He shakes his head. “I will be,” he says in a hushed voice. “Don’t worry about it, love. It’ll just take some time.” And he gives me a hug, saying, “In the meantime…”

And he snatches the note from me, reading out loud, “*Cannot wait*, he says.” He throws me a little squint. “I see how it is now. Just as soon as I get rid of a prince, a general comes a-knocking.”

“Don’t be gross,” I snap at him, but I’m smiling. “I’ve known him since I was, like, five.”

“No, but seriously, Nyx,” he insists. “Here’s the answer to what’s troubling you.”

Yes, General Alaric. He's always loved me for some reason. I still purse my lips. "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. We'll see."

"Either way," he says, "I think you should spend some time in your tundra this summer."

I give him a smile from ear to ear. "And I want you to come with me and I want to go meet your brothers."

I glance over my shoulder at the clock above the mantelpiece. "But right now…"

And I turn to look at him again, finding him already nodding, nudging me to get going.

But once I'm dressed and ready, he moves to come with me.

"You know, you don't need to go running around with me," I tell him. "I need to go to my brother, Hilde *and* Vasilisa. We can just meet up once I'm done."

"Nope," he says with a breathy laugh. And he comes to give me a deep, passionate kiss.

When I pull away, he has his hand in my back pocket and he's saying, "From now on, I'll be following that ass everywhere. You may as well start calling me your shadow."

And I don't know if it's possible for an ass to feel smug, but if it is… Mine sure as hell does.

*

I tell Dahrian to wait for me outside, feeling this should be a private moment between my brother and me. And I find him in the same Grimm Tower dungeon in which I found Ricky, all those months ago, all bloodied and looking terrified. It all makes me frown and turn so sad, but it also makes me happy with my decision to come alone.

"Hi, Nick," I say, in a gentle, hesitant voice, as soon as I come to stand in front of him.

He's sitting on the stone bench with the back of his head leaned against the stone wall and his arms resting limply in his lap, his hair disheveled and his eyes bloodshot.

"Come to tell me what a bloody moron I am?" he asks, but there's no defiance or anger in his voice.

"Actually, no," I say as I come a little closer and take a seat on the floor in front of him, making him frown a little.

For a moment, I stay silent, suddenly understanding what I wondered about months ago — how it all turned to shit between the two of us.

It evokes the memory of the reading of Father's will. What a spectacle Mother made of it, I think with bitterness in my mouth. And how she pulled him close when the executor read *my* name instead of his. And she whispered something in his ear, probably that it's not fair, that it's him who deserved it. And up until then, my brother's eyes were simply my brother's eyes filled with grief. But at that moment, something changed about the way he looked at me, and never went back to the way it used to be.

A sad smile tugging at my lips, I start in a voice barely above a whisper, "Did I ever tell you, Nick…"

He doesn't react, but I don't let it deter me. "Sometimes, when Father and I would take a walk, it'd be the morning after you'd put on one of your plays for us. Remember those?"

He pulls his head away from the wall and just looks at me with this pensive expression on his face.

"And you know what Father would say," I insist on continuing, "every single time, with this warm laugh and a spark in his eyes?"

"What?" comes a whispered question.

"That one day, you'll grow up, and he'll forever regret not getting to see another one of King Nikolay the Brave's adventures."

It makes my heart throb with pain, when I see his eyes turn watery.

"Look, Nick," I start, swallowing around a lump in my throat. "I didn't know how you felt about Father, the land and all that crap. It was stupid of me not to see it, but I didn't see it."

He doesn't say anything.

"Now, let me tell you something," I keep going, taking a deep breath so I can keep my voice steady. "Yes, I believe Father *did* do the right thing by leaving the land to *me*."

At that, he tears his eyes away from me and turns to look at some spot to my left.

I don't give up. "But it's not just running his estates that you can do to make sure he'd be proud of you if he were still with us," I tell him in a fervent voice. "There are so many paths in life. You just need to start exploring them, for real this time."

Even before I finish saying that, it hits me, how stupid that might sound to him right now.

He turns to look at me again, letting out a scoff.

"I'm sorry, Nick. That was insensitive. But they did say you could get out in five," I rush to say, expecting him to fall apart right in front of my eyes.

It's at that very moment that I hear the guard give the door three sharp knocks.

And I run my hand over my face, my breathing turning shallow as I imagine my little brother being taken to the Bloodholm Authority Office and then gods knows where next. And my heart cracks and I feel tears start to well in my eyes.

But he just gives me a smile, blows an amused smile through his nose and says, in a voice that's pensive and bone tired but somehow strong as well, "I guess I'm about to start bloody exploring."

The guard gives another three sharp knocks before he barges in.

"This wasn't fifteen minutes," I snap as I get up, but my focus gets drawn to my brother again. He's getting up, holding his hand out, making me see him in his pajamas with his teddy in his hand.

"Look, Nyx, I'm sorry," he says, with a somber face and a fervent voice, as I grab his hand and pull him into a hug. "I'm sorry for saying you're not my sister anymore," he keeps talking into my ear. "You'll always be my sister and I promise I'll be a better brother."

And I sense the guard come to stand behind me and I force myself to pull away. I throw him a smile, tears still in my eyes, and I turn on my heel and I start marching back up the stairs.

It's okay, it'll be okay, I tell myself, but my breathing remains shallow even after I reach the Grimm Tower Ground Floor.

But it's not just Dahrian I find there. There's Hilde rushing over to me, looking as if she's about to cry. I have to expel a breath to stop myself from doing the same.

"I've come to say my goodbyes, too," she says, all choked-up, as she comes to stop in front of me, shaking her head. "A part of me kept thinking they wouldn't be taking him after all. Oh you must be devastated, Nyx. I'm so sorry."

"No no," I say with a shake of my head. "I'm the one who needs to say sorry."

I take a deep breath, making her stop sniffling and frown at me. "Look, Hilde, here goes." I pause for a second, anxious about what I'm about to do. "I guess I've always hated you a little bit."

Her eyebrows shooting up, she lets out a scoff. “Never thought I’d say it,” she snaps, albeit warmly, “but I think I preferred it when you drew your knife at me.”

I blow a laugh through my nose. “No, listen,” I tell her, turning serious again. “It had nothing to do with you whatsoever. It was all me, me being pissed at myself for letting the world force me into making myself small.”

She tilts her head at me. “Aw.”

“Don’t you fucking ‘aw’ me,” I snap at her, but it only makes her let out a giggle.

So I roll my eyes at her and I say, fighting off the awkwardness as it starts flooding me, “Anyway, that’s all beside the point now. What I really want to get through to you, is how sorry I am for my behavior towards you, and how much I regret letting it stop me from getting to *know* you, like, for real.”

She raises her eyebrows at me, warmly but a little smugly as well.

“Um, so,” I start, feeling the awkwardness despite all the effort, “if you want to meet up over the summer…”

“That’s so f-ing sweet, Nyx,” she jumps in, grabbing my forearm to give it a little squeeze. “And yes, I’d love to. I mean,” she adds as she motions at Dahrian, giving me a knowing little smile, “I won’t count on it happening any time soon, but…”

I roll my eyes at her, but then I move to give her a hug. And she almost flinches, throwing me a little frown, but then she smiles and we hug, tightly.

It’s at that moment that this memory flashes through my mind, of one of the O’Malley brothers barging into my room with her when they brought me there after what happened with Ricky.

I pull away, squinting at her. “Hilde,” I ask, “are you and O’Malley…” I break off, realizing I don’t know which one.

She lets out a giggle. “Senior,” she tells me with a slightly shy smile. “And yes, we are.”

“I’m so happy for you,” I say with a grin.

She nods and we both turn serious again, remembering.

And I let her go to Nikolay, watching as she climbs down the stairs.

I only snap out of it when I feel a pair of strong arms wrap around my waist. “You okay, love?” he murmurs in my ear.

I turn to face him, putting my hands on his chest. “He’ll be fine,” I say pensively. Then I make myself snap out of it. “You know, I actually think

this is good for him."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, it's as if he's already a different person, you know? A more mature one."

"You'll go visit him all the time, and you'll come to have a great relationship, I'm sure of it."

"Thank you, Dahrian. I really do hope so. Now, I only have one more thing to do before we can finally get the fuck out of here."

"Yes, please."

*

I walk into the portrait room, closing the door behind me. And I'm already opening my mouth to call her name, but then my eyes land on the painting and my mind goes blank.

There's no Lady X anymore. Now it's a portrait of Vasilisa as *I* know her. She's on horseback, looking as if she's about to spur the horse into a gallop while throwing me this look that's keeping me pinned in place. Ruthlessly determined and filled with this burning hunger.

Frowning, I take a step closer, my eyes dragging from the skull crown on her head, down the ancient-looking riding uniform, and then back up to her eyes. All the while, Dame Gothel's words echo in my head. Everything will stay the same here, she said, except for one painting.

I guess I just didn't want to think about it, the possibility of it meaning I'll be losing Vasilisa.

Still, there's hope in my voice when I call out to her. She doesn't respond.

I do it again and again, with no success whatsoever.

My heart sinking low, I finally let out a sigh and walk out of her room, finding Dahrian waiting outside.

"She's not there anymore," I tell him with a frown.

"I was afraid of that," he says as he comes to wrap his arm around me. "What do you want to do?"

For a second, I stay silent. Then I decide. "I'll have the painting brought to the Winter Palace," I say, this sadness overflowing me as I pull away, take his hand and nudge him in the direction of the stairs. "That way, I'll be able to say goodbye to her at least. But right now…" I don't stop going down the stairs, but I throw him a smile. "All I want is to start my summer with you."

"You know what that is?" he leans to ask.

“What?”

“Music to my ears,” he says with a smile, making me laugh.

And we walk out of Lilith Tower and head straight for the Pull Chamber, me already having arranged for our luggage to wait for us at Dahrian’s.

“Is that *him* again?” he asks when my phone pings.

I whip it out and see it is, but I just keep walking, my hand still in his.

“Can’t you block him or something?” he asks.

I look up at him. “Don’t be like that.”

“Well, he’s a fucking asshole.”

“He’s not *all* bad.”

He blows a laugh through his nose, making me stop and look at him. “I see you don’t fully understand the nature of my hatred for him. It’s not *just* about his character.”

I frown at him.

“Oh I love it when you’re being thick like that, Nyx,” he tells me, making me shove at his chest for being an ass.

He lets out a laugh, grabs my waist with one hand and explains, “Fucking Aalders could become the holiest of holy men and he’d still be fucking Aalders to me,” he says with a shrug, “simply because he used to get under those pants. And what’s under those pants is *mine*.”

“Even if it were yours *now*,” I protest as I keep walking, “it sure as hell wasn’t then.”

“It was always mine,” he says matter-of-factly, “I just wasn’t at the location yet.”

That makes me have to stifle a laugh.

“Still, he should’ve known,” he continues scoldingly. “He was trespassing and I hate to say it, but I’m not a forgiving man.”

“Oh yes you are.”

“Not when it comes to *you*.”

I look up at him again, smiling and rolling my eyes. “You idiot.”

It makes his face light up. But then his eyes dart ahead and I turn to see the Pull Chamber appear from between the bushes.

My eyebrows pull down as soon as I spot her. Mother, standing next to the cast-iron fence, throwing daggers at Dahrian.

*

We both stop midstep. I let go of Dahrian’s hand and start moving toward her, sensing Dahrian staying put to give me space.

“So it really is true, what they’re all saying?” Mother demands as I come to a stop before her, thumbing her nose with her eyes still fixed on my boyfriend. Then she turns to look at *me*. “Even the part with him climbing up the Tower to you like some ape?”

I let out a sigh, surprised to see how little I care. “What’re you doing here, Mother?”

“Stopping you from making the biggest mistake of your life,” she says with the usual conviction in her voice. “Maybe it’s a good thing, that you haven’t stayed with Max.”

My eyebrows pull down.

“It seems he’s fallen out of favor with the King due to some gambling incident,” she explains.

“I don’t really care,” I tell her.

“Anastasya,” she starts, obviously fighting to stay civil, “you have two roads ahead of you.” She glances at Dahrian again. “You can go with him and thus effectively ruin your life — because no one will have you once they find out who you’ve been with.”

The warning look she throws me almost makes me let out a laugh.

“Or you can realize he’s a mistake and let me find the next best match for you.”

For a second, I just look at her. Then I run my hand over my face, let out a sigh and take a step closer to her. “I want you to leave, Mother. Right now.”

She lets out a scoff. “What did you say to me, girl?”

Deciding not to put up with another second of her bullshit, I let my mind make the connection with the blood coursing through her hand. I see the flash of surprise in her eyes. I make the hand close into a fist. “I said,” I tell her softly, “I want you to leave, Mother. Right now.”

And I think it’s more my indifference than my Blood Magic that scares her. She just blinks at me for a second. Then she grits her teeth and says, “We’ll talk over the holidays, Anastasya,” before she pushes past me and walks away.

Smiling, I turn to face Dahrian, finding him already in front of me. “Big day, huh?” he asks with a smile.

I roll my eyes and grab him by the hand. Blowing out a little laugh, he lets me start dragging him to the Pull Chamber.

And I move to open the fence door, but he stops me.

I turn to look at him and find his eyes sweeping over the castle grounds.

"This place…," he says, turning to look at me with such soft eyes. "I'm so grateful to this place, Nyx. For allowing me to finally meet you."

"And whisk me away," I add with a grin.

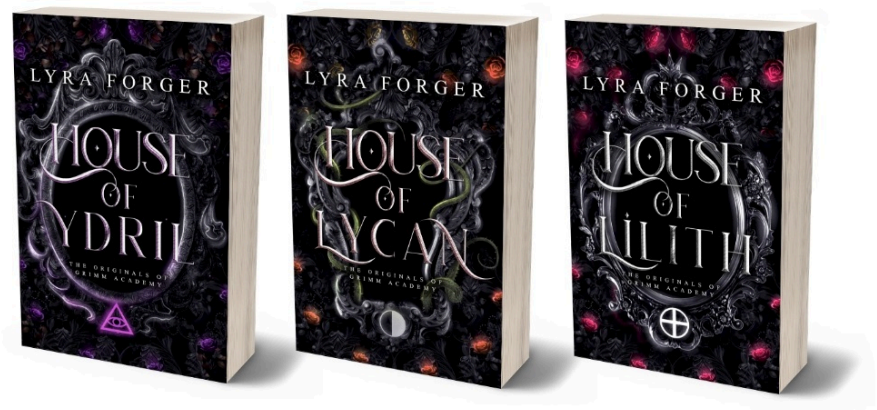
He lets out a laugh and grabs me by the waist. "Oh you don't need whisking away. But I'll do it anyway, my little vixen."

And he kisses me, deeply, and I give him a little bite on the neck and I pull him into the Chamber with me. There, I jump into his lap and let him spin me around, laughing, as the Pull zaps us out of Grimm Academy and straight into a brand new life.

Enjoyed House of Lilith?
There's more! - Don't miss out!

Review, newsletter signup, socials, it's all here!
CLICK HERE TO VIEW OPTIONS!

***



Click here to view the whole series.